

WORDS  
OF  
**UNCOMMON SHAPE**

HOW WRITERS CREATE VIVIDNESS  
IN LANGUAGE AND **STORY**

BY  
P. T. Barber

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## To Betchen

*ἐρωτηθεὶς τί ἐστι φίλος, ἔφη,  
“ μία ψυχὴ δύο σώμασιν ἐνοικοῦσα.”*

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I used to worship the mighty genius of Michael Angelo—that man who was great in poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture—great in everything he undertook. But I do not want Michael Angelo for breakfast—for luncheon—for dinner—for tea—for supper—for between meals. I like a change, occasionally. In Genoa, he designed every thing; in Milan he or his pupils designed every thing; he designed the Lake of Como; in Padua, Verona, Venice, Bologna, who did we ever hear of, from guides, but Michael Angelo? In Florence, he painted every thing, designed every thing, nearly, and what he did not design, he used to sit on a favorite stone and look at, and they showed us the stone. In Pisa he designed every thing but the old shot-tower, and they would have attributed that to him if it had not been so awfully out of the perpendicular.

—Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad*





**Fig. 1. Contrastive views of scholarly life,  
sculpted above Yale Law School doors**  
(Photos courtesy Henry Trotter © 2005)



## Chapter One

### Cognitive Collision

Beauty is all very well at first sight; but who ever  
looks at it when it has been in the house three days?  
—George Bernard Shaw<sup>1</sup>

Carved in stone on the tympani above the entrance of the Yale Law School are two scenes from the scholarly life.

In the one a professor, with his right hand on a pile of immense books, harangues a group of students who are sprawled across their desks in the deep sleep you associate with princesses in fairy tales. Eyeing this, one nods in recognition of what appears to be a typical 8:00 a.m. class at a university. And the books are an accurate rendition of what assigned reading looks like to an undergraduate.

The other scene is a dramatic contrast to the first, fanciful rather than realistic in its elements. For there the students are arguing furiously and the professor is slumbering. I hold no brief—to borrow an image from the Law School—for either group, having been both student and professor. But it is indisputable that professors rarely fall asleep in class, since they are under the influence of a powerful stimulant: being the center of attention and discoursing on their own ideas. Conversely, the students are commonly subjected to a potent soporific: listening to someone else do all the talking. It is no wonder that their attention span is limited and surprising that they learn as much as they do.

But while we may gently criticize the second scene as unrealistic, we recognize that the two scenes together form one of those wholes that are greater than the sum of their parts. Their sculptor recognized two simple principles that play a large part in human cognition:

1. The Principle of Contrast: Our brains perceive on the basis of contrast. Vividness, as we shall see, depends on contrast. Either carving loses much of its punch if it stands alone.

2. The Principle of Coherence: Our memories function best on the basis of relatedness. If you asked a group of people where these sculptures came from, probably not one would suggest a tire factory, a sewage plant, or the city hall. We all recognize that they belong at a school. (If this is supremely obvious to you, it is because your organ of coherence is intact.)

What is not obvious is that these two principles are profoundly at odds with each other.



In [*The Rape of the Lock*] are exhibited...the two most engaging powers of an author. New things are made familiar, and familiar things are made new.

—Samuel Johnson<sup>2</sup>

Since it is the new that is most contrastive, the Principle of Contrast demands an unceasing supply of newness. It demands newness with the focus and intensity of a puppy demanding attention. But the Principle of Coherence insists that nothing unrelated be introduced into the equation. The catch is that it is difficult to prevent the new from being unrelated. And as simple as these two principles appear, their contradictory demands create a combinatorial explosion with startling consequences. Putting them together is not unlike pouring a nicely stable bucket of water onto the tranquil surface of a tank of sulfuric acid.

In fiction, coherence is easiest to illustrate if we remove it from a story. Imagine that Agatha Christie, while writing a new Hercule Poirot mystery, had found that Poirot's incessant prissiness was growing tiresome, and halfway through the story she replaced him with Miss Marple. She would have traded her problem of vividness for a problem of coherence: the reader would demand that the change be generated by forces inherent in the story and not be a mere convenience to the author. As we shall see, in fiction the principal artifact of the struggle between contrast and coherence is the phenomenon of plot. It is possible—and I am living proof of it—to get through a literature Ph.D. at a major university without really understanding plot, as I learned when I started to write fiction. And yet it is perhaps a sign of wisdom if our graduate

programs in literature do not try to teach their students what plot is. It is not all that easy to learn to write plots, let alone to understand how and why plot works; and teaching it is like trying to teach people to get a firm grasp on a hyperactive eel in a vat of olive oil. It is simpler just to leave eels and plot alone. But plot has the function of restoring vividness to a story, and vividness is something that writers simply cannot ignore as long as their readership is a voluntary one. Because their audiences were not obliged to be in attendance, classical dramatists sometimes found themselves at odds with their traditional dramatic theory: they talked Aristotle and did whatever was necessary. Racine is surely at his most sincere when he says, “The principal rule is to give pleasure and to touch the emotions. All of the other rules are intended only to help us succeed in this first one.”<sup>3</sup>



It is a common experience that a prolonged sense of pleasure becomes monotonous and positively painful in the long run. Pleasure to be pleasure must be necessarily fleeting. If we experienced one set of pleasures all the time we should hardly enjoy them. Everything depends upon comparison.

—*Swami Abhedananda*<sup>4</sup>

Die Reize der Sinne sterben mit ihrer Befriedigung.  
[The allurements of the senses die with their gratification.]  
—Friedrich Schiller<sup>5</sup>

To understand rhetoric, then, we have to understand cognition; the one is designed to accommodate the other, after all. If writers designed their work to hold the attention of a chimpanzee, it might abound in grunts; if an ant, it might be expressed chemically. But always sender and receiver are matched. So when we design our messages for a human reader, with human cognition, we have to take into account the peculiarities of the receiving set.

This would be easier to understand if the nature of cognition were not itself as slippery as that eel from a couple of paragraphs back. The matter can be stated simply with an imaginary example: let’s suppose that

we could not take in the meaning of a word unless it was uttered twice. So an actor playing Hamlet would have to stutter: “To to be be or or not not to to be be.” In other words, the limitation of our cognition would be reflected flawlessly in rhetoric, unless, of course, the writer came out of the academy without knowing this rule.

But many of the rules of cognition are much more subtle than this. For example, there’s a rule that any perception, no matter how vivid, becomes dull with exposure, much the way silver tarnishes. This is why the clever sayings of one generation are dated by the next. “That’s the bee’s knees” was striking early in the twentieth century because most people had never given any thought to the articulation of the legs of bees, or entertained the idea that a bee’s joints might be used to express that which is especially neat and clever. But long exposure robbed this expression of its vividness, as must inevitably happen to any clever expression.

We are all familiar with the phenomenon of cloying: our favorite food would lose all its excitement for us if we ate nothing else. Enough Häagendazs might even inspire in one a desire for a bracing platter of Swiss chard. But writers know that our other senses have this same limitation. So John Dryden recommends a plot that “is neither large nor intricate, but just enough to fill the minds of the audience, not to cloy them.”<sup>6</sup>

The phenomenon of cloying—which Twain illustrates so nicely in the passage about Michelangelo<sup>A</sup>—demands that all fiction be constantly restyled to accommodate the sensory-satiation of the reading public, and all by itself it would bring about literary revolutions even if there were no other causes of such revolutions. When I refer to its workings as “subtle,” I do so because, unlike our imaginary example from Hamlet, these are difficult to trace or predict. The public palate first enjoys a new sensation, then tolerates it, then finally rejects it with disgust. George Bernard Shaw remarked on this: “But to all wildly popular things comes, suddenly and inexorably, death without hope of resurrection.... The street-piano men of the East End will tell you that this psychological phenomenon repeats itself with every music-hall song that becomes the rage. For weeks and

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A. Epigraph to this volume, page v.

sometimes months nothing else will be listened to: there is no limit to the number of repetitions people will not only stand but clamor for. Then in one day they will not tolerate it on any terms; it would be safer to play a Bach fugue.”<sup>7</sup> In the fiction industry, of course, a day’s notice is not enough: because of the lag in time between conception and publication of a novel, there is always the danger that the author will serve up to the public a sensory banquet that cloy rather than satisfies. If dullness is like the tarnish on silver, it is a variable-speed tarnish, one that operates according to laws too murky to predict. And because of this, publishers risk as little as possible when they publish a novel, as John Sutherland has pointed out in his book on the bestseller. Typically, publishers put copies out into the marketplace to see if they will sell; if they do, more are printed. If not, the book quickly makes it to the remainder table. “Fiction is...constantly testing response and itself responding to the market. Its supply-demand-supply cycle is rapid, pulsating, constantly adapting.”<sup>8</sup>

There is another rule that says that vividness derives directly from contrast. This rule, rather than some kind of social bias, is the principal cause of stereotyping in fiction, because the more different you make your characters, in order to create lots of contrast, the more predictable and stereotyped they become. If you are writing genre fiction, and your hero is a tough detective, you will probably give him a partner who is his opposite—a sensitive woman, say, or a gay man. And the more you differentiate these characters, the less “real” and the more vivid they become. In comic strips and animated films, where “realness” is not an important issue, one sees such contrast most clearly: Dilbert lives in a world inhabited not just by strange human colleagues but also by chatty animals, some of them smarter than the people; Shrek—large, green, sort of human-shaped, and gruff—is accompanied by a short grey donkey with logorrhea, who himself soon pairs up with an enormous, lovestruck, fire-breathing dragon.<sup>B</sup>

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B. In a class in Ludwigsburg, Germany, when I asked for examples of this simple principle, one of my students suggested “Dick und Doof” (“[the] Fat [guy] and [the] Stupid [guy]”). The class was then shocked to find that I had never heard of them—exclaiming that they were, after all, American actors—and it eventually came out that these were the German names for Laurel and Hardy—or, more accurately, Hardy and Laurel.

Hovering like a black cloud over these rules, there is a merciless Fact that makes them difficult to implement, and that is the demand of our consciousness that the world—including the world of fiction—be all of a piece, that it “make sense,” that it be coherent. Aristotle was familiar with this phenomenon and referred to one aspect of it as “unity of action.”<sup>9</sup> Coherence dominates human thought, which is probably why human history always makes some kind of sense to us, even if we have to revise history every generation or so to adapt it to our current schema. One epoch may see history as cyclical, another as figural; one may depend on metaphors from evolutionary theory, another on metaphors from psychology. At a distance, such accounts take on the aspect of myth, but from up close, and during their brief flowering, they are wonderfully persuasive. When I was young, we saw the settling of America as a grand and glorious achievement, hampered at times by backward peoples with whom we sought generously to share our civilization; now we see the same events as a catastrophic rip-off of the native population. I cannot say what our next mythology will make of these same events, but you have my personal guarantee that the current version will undergo heavy revision with time.

\*

Newness would be easy enough to create if it were not for this principle of coherence: at any point in your story, you could simply slough off your dull old characters and events and bring in shiny new ones, which, of course, would in their turn instantly begin to tarnish. Mysteries would then be easy to write: the villain could be someone the reader had never encountered, instead of having to be someone who has been present throughout the story. (The reason we once had the cliché that “the butler did it” is that the butler has the useful quality of being unobtrusively present throughout the story, which at one time made it easy for the reader to overlook him. Now, as a villain, he is quite dead himself, the victim of overexposure and the classless society—although the film *Gosford Park* got some more service out of him by morphing him into the quietly efficient head housekeeper.) As we shall see later, the sameness forced on us by coherence causes writers to create methods of constantly altering the old, so that it changes its appearance: it is considered unfair to solve your narrative problems by introducing a new character late in the story, but it

is perfectly acceptable to put a new face on an old character. The villain can't turn out to be a character previously unknown to the reader, but he can turn out to be a familiar character with dark secrets. Often this phenomenon makes life very difficult for the author. If you write genre novels of a type with few characters, such as the romantic novels designed for an audience of women, it can be extremely difficult to conceal the identity of your hero, should you wish to do so. In fact, often the savvy reader can locate the hero very early in the story merely because he is the fellow who looks most villainous and was just impossibly rude to the heroine. The early rudeness of Jem in du Maurier's *Jamaica Inn* gives a hint to the experienced reader that Jem is a strong candidate for the position of hero—but it wouldn't do to give anything away.

The demand for coherence is apparently imposed on us by the left brain, which insistently demands and creates coherence even where there is none.<sup>C</sup> In patients whose epilepsy has been controlled by cutting the two million neurons that connect the two sides of the brain, this demand of the left hemisphere for coherence has been repeatedly observed. Michael Gazzaniga describes an experiment in which a split-brain patient is asked to select a picture related to the scene he is shown. His right hemisphere is then shown a picture of a snow scene, but the left is shown a picture of a chicken's foot. The correct answer for the right hand (left hemisphere) is a picture of a chicken; for the left hand (right hemisphere), a picture of a snow shovel. The patient made both choices correctly. "After his response," says Gazzaniga, "I asked him, 'Paul, why did you do that?' Paul looked up and without a moment's hesitation said from his left hemisphere, 'Oh, that's easy. The chicken claw goes with the chicken and you need a shovel to clean out the chicken shed.'"<sup>10</sup> The left hemisphere knew nothing of the snow scene; therefore, in order to make sense of the choice made by the right hemisphere, it formed a theory to link them. For whatever reasons, our brains seek and find coherent meaning at all costs. A philosopher, considering the implications of this fact, might conclude that we should be deeply suspicious of the theories we produce. But for a writer the message is that everything has to hang together.

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C. I use the term "left brain" here to refer to the language/logic side. In about four percent of the population, mostly left-handers, the language side is actually on the right.



All literature is gossip.  
—Truman Capote<sup>11</sup>

It is important to see that contrast is the source of vividness, whereas coherence—which keeps returning to the old, hence dull—is the enemy of vividness. They are linked by their common destiny. Contrast is a child always trying to wander away from the familiar road, into new territory; coherence is the mother pointing out that he will get lost. But the child will see to it that, if he gets too bored, everyone present will share in his disappointment.

Once we look at rhetoric this way, we see that the writer's problems—at least where vividness is concerned—grow in direct proportion to his or her demands on the reader's attention. It is easy to be briefly entertaining but monstrously difficult to entertain for hours on end. Few comics are good enough to get an hour-long special. Almost anyone can tell a single joke successfully; few people can write a funny novel. The reader's attention can be stretched only so far before it snaps like a rubber band. Consequently, a writer who goes on at length is likely to make every possible claim on our attention: the story often becomes an elaboration of a common fantasy; especially juicy information is held back as long as possible (a matter of judgment: too long and the rubber band snaps); and the seven deadly sins, along with their close kin, Curiosity, are trotted out for our titillation. The people, as a French critic of the seventeenth century observed, “delight ordinarily to hear ill spoken of others.”<sup>12</sup> Human beings, in fact, like gossip so much that they will happily listen to it for hours—even if it is completely fabricated and told about people who don't exist.

Many years ago this book started out as the question, “How is it that good writers consistently keep their language and stories vivid and interesting?” After some decades of study, I'm pretty sure I know at least part of the answer, largely because I have accepted help from anyone who knows anything about the subject, with a special bias toward people who are obliged by their trade to master practical rhetoric. And since the issues of contrast and coherence are also cognitive issues, I have sought help



from cognitive specialists as well as from writers and editors, even if they are perched on entirely different branches of the tree of knowledge.



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2. Johnson, 221.
3. Racine, preface to *Bérénice*, in Sidnell, 263.
4. Ramakrishna, in Thorne, 45.
5. Schiller, 199: from “Was kann eine gut stehende Schaubühne eigentlich wirken?”
6. Dryden, “An Essay of Dramatick Poesie,” in Clark, 139.
7. Shaw, *Shaw on Theatre*, 112.
8. Sutherland, *Bestsellers*, 37.
9. Aristotle, *Poetics*, in Fyfe, 32.
10. Gazzaniga, 72.
11. Quoted in Winokur, 46.
12. François Ogier, in Clark, 87.

## Chapter Two

### A Megalosaurus in WC1

In our contact senses of touch, taste and smell, adaptation to the stimulus occurs fairly quickly and the sensory experience ceases. Even visual perception is dependent upon some degree of change in the pattern of excitation received by the retina.

—Alan Richardson<sup>1</sup>

Informing the reader is the primary purpose of the press.  
But boring him in the process defeats that purpose.

—Howard Heyn and Warren Brier<sup>2</sup>

“Does every story,” I wondered, “have to have a hero and a heroine?”

“Every story, since Adam and Eve.”

That story, I reflected, if you came to think of it, scarcely had an ending either; it started well, but tailed off into Cain and Abel, and I could not remember what had happened to Eve. Ian Crawford, I supposed, was right, but it was unsatisfactory, for everything ought to have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

—Elspeth Huxley, *The Flame Trees of Thika*<sup>3</sup>

When I first read Aristotle’s *Poetics*, I remember making fun of his observation, in his discussion of the components of a tragedy, that a whole has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Aha! I thought: a universal, true also of shaggy-dog stories, letters to the *Times*, and garter snakes. But if the observation seems simple, its implications are complex, for it implies linearity, and linearity implies order. Life and fiction use the same raw material but portion them out differently: it is the difference between rain pouring down indiscriminately on your broccoli plants and your new Easter hat, and your water hose soaking the plum tree but not the cactus garden.

But as brilliant as Aristotle was, much of what he had to say isn't terribly relevant to modern literature. Scholars can't even agree on what Aristotle thought the drama was doing to the emotions of fear and pity—the traditional interpretation was that these were being purged from the spectators—but it is clear that we do not give much thought to the matter any more unless we are reading Aristotle. Nowadays, often as not, drama is intended first and foremost to sell: the playbill for *Phantom of the Opera* does not hype it as an emotional purgative.

The modern public has less exalted notions of the function of fiction than Aristotle. And the modern editor may require only that fiction sell. For most readers, whatever else it does, fiction makes up for the deficiencies of life. Life is messy, fiction is tidy; life has a regrettable tendency to overdo things—there is always too much rain, or too little sun—and we retreat to fiction for solace, where rain and sun can be strictly controlled, and even God can be put in His place. But we learn soon enough that, since all sensory input cloys with time, we become satiated from too much exposure to *any* form of stimulation. The writer, then (or the concert organizer, or the movie-maker), not only has to create a source of excitation of our senses but must also regenerate it constantly, since any perception, no matter how vivid, loses its potency with time, just as the eye stops seeing when it is obliged to look at an unvarying scene.<sup>A</sup>

Renewed contrast, then, is a kind of refrigeration for sensory input: it keeps it fresh.

The phenomenon of sensory satiation is well known and can be demonstrated most easily with vision. Try the following simple experiment: stare for twenty seconds at a red object on a white surface, then remove the object and look at the white surface. You will notice that the object has appeared again in your field of vision, or at least its form has, except that it is now green. This is because, in the short time you stared at it, some of the cones, or color receptors in your eyes (the ones sensitive to red), lost some of their sharpness from exposure, so that the after-image is in the shape of the object you stared at. The reason the after-image is green rather than red is that green is what is left over when

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A. Conversely, when the eye is free to move but there is little variation in what it sees, the mind may generate hallucinations: mirages occur in landscapes lacking in contrast.

fatigue takes red out of the spectrum of colors available to your vision.

For the writer, the phenomenon of sensory-satiation is a practical problem. It is most important to people who are obliged to hold on to their audience: professors can be boring, comedians cannot. Writers of television commercials are especially well trained in our subject, largely because, in the age of the mute button, their trade places a great premium on vividness. There was a time when television commercials consisted of a man in a suit talking up the quality of his product. But we have acquired immunity to all the unsubtle forms of salesmanship, and now the commercials have to give us scenes that are contrasted with our expectations, so that we're shown, say, a loud and extravagant car commercial that is then cut off suddenly so that a salesman, soft-spoken and earnest, can suggest that his company doesn't need to do the kind of advertising that it just proved it *does* need to do.

The expected and the actual: this is a type of contrast that is endemic not just in the advertising industry but in literature as well. In the opening scene of Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*, the hero looks out of an office window—so we are in modern times—to see an army of cavalry and foot soldiers rushing by in disarray—so we are in a historical novel; except that, “While he watched, a little fat man, wearing a cork sun-helmet, polo shirt and knickers, darted around the corner of the building in pursuit of the army.

‘Stage Nine—you bastards—Stage Nine!’ he screamed through a small megaphone.”

In the opening of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, West uses this kind of contrast even more succinctly: “The Miss Lonelyhearts of the New York *Post-Dispatch* (Are you in trouble?—Do-you-need-advice?—Write-to-Miss-Lonelyhearts-and-she-will-help-you) sat at his desk and stared at a piece of white cardboard.” Here we're brought up short because it hasn't occurred to us that a character with a female title will not in fact be a woman.

Damon Knight, the distinguished writer of science fiction, has the following to say about this technique, commonly referred to as the “narrative hook”:

I had better admit that I dislike these methods; when I was young it was different, but nowadays if I look at the beginning of a story and

find that the author is trying to grab me by the lapels, I go away and leave her to clutch somebody else. My feeling now is that if the author has something interesting to say, she can capture my attention by saying it.<sup>4</sup>

Knight's remarks are instructive: the narrative hook, like any technique, can lose some of its excitement as you are exposed to it repeatedly and see through its function.

The cloying process is inexorable and allows for no exceptions. Imagine that a purple dragon showed up in your yard wearing a tuxedo and an orange cummerbund. You might be fascinated by the spectacle, but it would *still* be subject to the merciless law that any perception, however vivid, becomes dull with time. If the dragon wished to keep the edge on your perception of him, he would finally have to breathe fire, or swallow a princess, or duke it out with Saint George.

In both advertising and literature we can take it for a fixed rule that change—of which movement is one form—will be a constant. We can see what devilry a *lack* of change plays at any national park—Yosemite, for example—where thousands of tourists come to stare ever so briefly at gigantic but motionless rocks. El Capitan is striking enough, and it is in accord with the unities of time, place, and action; but it is short on suspense, doesn't seem to be going anywhere, and—except in a geological time-frame—is sadly lacking in character development.

Back when the technology did not yet exist for introducing change constantly, much advertising was as static as El Capitan. The industry, making a virtue out of necessity, created a saturation theory of advertisement, the idea being that mere exposure to the ad caused sales. Some of these ads, such as that for Ajax (boom! boom! the foaming cleanser!), reverberate in the recesses of my consciousness to this day. I have never purchased Ajax, but I could more easily forget to take my toes along when I go for a walk than I could forget the Ajax jingle. Billboards advertised cigarettes by showing well-dressed, sophisticated people firing up little paper tubes of carcinogenic weeds and then sucking on them. Eventually—an early example of kinetic advertising—one of the cigarette companies put up a billboard in Times Square that puffed out steam to represent the smoke from the cigarettes. This was striking enough, but for the commuter, who passes by every day, it would not take long for even

this billboard to become dull. How long would you continue to look up at it? A week? Surely after a month or so the joke would grow old, and then the billboard company would have to make the smoker start hacking, or keel over from a heart attack, to attract your attention once again.

Because of this problem, billboards are being designed nowadays that don't just show vivid scenes or captions but actually change these even as you watch. Some years ago, on a freeway near my home there was a billboard that showed a picture of a jalapeño pepper. As you watched the scene, the jalapeño disappeared and you saw a Polynesian man—he appeared to have eaten the jalapeño—breathing fire from one end of the billboard to the other. And then the fire-breather too disappeared and was replaced by a truck and a legend suggesting that this—the truck, not the jalapeño—was the hottest item in town.

Such kinetic advertising is taking over nowadays because it makes contrast possible. For many years, at NBA games, ads were put up at the edge of the court, facing the television cameras. But eventually the advertisers introduced a contrastive element to their ads by putting them on a frame that revolved them and replaced one with another. The movement attracted your eye, and you suddenly realized that Michelin's promise to keep your baby safe was being replaced by Gatorade's pledge to replace your vital fluids. In that moment, you surely experienced more exposure to the ads than during all the time they simply sat there as a backdrop to the game. On the Internet, of course, advertisers cause their product to leap out in front of what you're trying to do and scream for attention.

In television advertising, where movement—a source of contrast—is always possible, the industry has been aware all along that a static scene will not arrest the attention of the beholder. The following quotation is from a 1958 manual on television advertising:

The eye comprehends more thoroughly than the ear, but also becomes bored more quickly. Therefore, it is necessary to keep the eye constantly interested; and motion is an excellent way to do this. In fact, while motion is in progress, it is difficult for a viewer to take his eyes off the screen; the eye instinctively wants to see the end of a motion. The motion itself need not always be particularly significant, nor, for that matter, even intended. A fly walking across a page will

draw attention. But naturally, the more interest there is in the outcome, the more attention will be paid to the action itself. A demonstration that normally would require very little time can sometimes be protracted with no loss of interest because the viewer is interested in seeing the final result.

At points where there is no action in the object being photographed, motion can be continued by a movement of the camera or by use of an optical. An optical is a change in the picture beyond the scope of straight photography, and is usually accomplished in the processing of pictures on film, or electronically if the picture is live. Typical opticals are fades, wipes, dissolves, superimpositions, double images, and revolving multi-images. All opticals, in that they change the picture, involve motion.<sup>5</sup>

Anything that changes the picture involves motion; any motion creates contrast; and it is contrast that holds our attention.<sup>B</sup> People who are interviewed for television programs get used to the cameraman taking a few shots of them just walking about, so that the producer can show something more contrastive than an author sitting on a chair in a studio, squinting at the bright lights. And it is certainly no surprise, from an evolutionary standpoint, that our brains are designed to notice movement: predators and prey alike profit from knowing what is moving nearby.



If a completely stable optical image is projected on to the retina by means of special apparatus attached to the cornea, after a few seconds the pattern can no longer be seen... To prevent this rapid process of visual adaptation it is necessary for the optical image to change, very slightly, its position on the retina and this is produced under natural conditions by the minute oscillatory movements of the two eyeballs.

—Alan Richardson<sup>6</sup>

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B. The tendency of the eye to follow movement is put to use in courses on speed-reading. Readers move an object—a pencil, say, or a finger—past the words and train themselves not to read the words sub-vocally, which slows one down. Take away the moving object and it becomes harder to speed-read.

Stated thus, the issue of vividness seems simple enough: the author—whether of a novel or of a television commercial—simply has to introduce contrastive material into his text, so that the new is always sufficiently different from the old to re-engage the reader's interest. As we shall see, our brain's demand for coherence raises hob with this process, but for now let us look at an example from literature. We shall begin with the opening of *Bleak House*:

London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a *Megalosaurus*, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snow-flakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, indistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill-temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog



all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.

Gas [lanterns] looming through the fog in divers places in the streets, much as the sun may, from the spongy fields, be seen to loom by husbandman and ploughboy. Most of the shops lighted two hours before their time—as the gas seems to know, for it has a haggard and unwilling look.

The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest, near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation: Temple Bar. And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.

Never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mud and mire too deep, to assort with the groping and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners, holds, this day, in the sight of heaven and earth.<sup>7</sup>

Dickens goes on at some length here—almost 500 words—to describe the scene at the beginning of *Bleak House*. The information he gives us is trivial: its substance is that it is a raw, foggy afternoon and there is much mud in the streets. But Dickens knows that, if the reader is not to get bogged down in that mud, he, Dickens, will have to write of it with great vividness. Now, if contrast is essential for vividness, and if only the new is contrastive, we should expect two things from Dickens: a lot of things juxtaposed that are very different, and a lot of things presented to the reader that he or she does not expect—that are new.

And almost at once we meet a Megalosaurus waddling up Holborn Hill: the exotic in a familiar setting. The Megalosaurus waddles into a sentence that apparently begins in the time of Noah—the waters but newly retired from the face of the earth. It is not a real Megalosaurus, but Dickens makes it look plausible enough. Against the possibility that we have not recently seen a Megalosaurus, Dickens imagines for us how they walk: a combination of lizard and elephant—two contrasting creatures (one large and lumbering, the other small and scurrying) that we *are* familiar with.

After the triumph of the Megalosaurus, a writer less obsessed with vividness might be content merely to tell us of the smoke and soot; but Dickens knows that smoke and soot are not only familiar to us but are not out of place in the scene he is describing. They are, therefore, not merely dull but doubly so. Consequently, he juxtaposes the soot, by means of an image, with something both like it in size and shape and opposite to it in color and origin: a snowflake. In the interests of vividness, if Dickens mentions fire, he is likely to contrast it with ice. And because a simile expresses similarity, if the snowflakes were not in some respect like the flakes of soot, they could not be compared with them. That is, it would be less effective to say, “flakes of soot as big as marbles,” for marbles do not commonly float about in the air.

Dickens then gives volition to the flakes of soot, supposing that they have gone into mourning for the death of the sun—an unexpected, hence vivid image. We shall have more to say in a moment about the animation of natural phenomena.

When he gets back to the mud, Dickens’s task is to make vivid something that is, after all, prosaic, static, and lacking in color. He creates movement—hence contrast—by showing us not the mud itself but the effect it has on the passersby, who are slipping and becoming ill-tempered. The deposits of mud segue into an image from banking: they accumulate at compound interest. The substance of what he is saying is, “There was a great deal of mud, and in some places there was more than in others.” But the image from banking, which applies an abstract concept of accumulation to a concrete situation, is unexpected and highly contrastive, hence vivid. Here we must fight off the common supposition that writing is efficient as it uses the fewest words possible to get across an idea. Entertaining writing is ultimately efficient only if the reader continues to read, which is why the ratio of words to meaning is irrelevant. If you can keep the reader’s attention, it is allowable to use 500 words to say the weather was lousy.

Dickens goes on to tell us that it was not only muddy, it was also foggy. Fog, like mud, is prosaic, static, and lacking in color, so Dickens knows that he will have to give this particular fog some life if it is not to bore the reader. And in fact this is no ordinary fog, it is astonishingly dynamic. Ordinary fog spends much of its time sitting quietly and

peacefully in one place, but this fog flows, rolls, creeps, hovers, droops, and, gaining life and intent, pinches toes cruelly. Dickens gives vividness to his fog by a series of deliberate contrasts that show the fog in opposite places. The fog is up the river, in green areas, down the river in polluted areas; it is in lowland marshes and in the Kentish heights. When he runs out of ups and downs to report, he shows the fog in the vicinity of contrasted types of vessels (great ships, small boats) and contrasted people (the wheezing pensioners and the wrathful skipper). The skipper is wrathful probably because his ship is harbor-bound, owing to the fog, but it may be more to the point that, as a character in a novel, he is in any case apt to be strung to a higher tension than non-fictional people.

And notice how Dickens finds yet another opposite perspective from which to view the fog: he goes from “down in [the skipper’s] close cabin”—inside and down—to up on the bridges—outside and up—where, by means of an image, he puts imaginary characters into a twice-imaginary balloon.

One can find more contrasts here, but as my analysis has already gone on longer than Dickens’s passage, it may be as well to leave it at that. But here we must anticipate Chapter Three briefly. I said that Dickens uses around 500 words to say that it was foggy and muddy. That is a substantial passage—far too long to turn out to be irrelevant to the story. We may not think about this explicitly, but deep in our left brain there is a nagging feeling, activated by the Principle of Coherence, that Dickens had better be going somewhere with all this. And Dickens knows that too, which is why he treats the fog and mud, which delay and hinder, as a symbol of the delay and hindrance of the High Court of Chancery. In fact, he comes close to saying that the Court is the very source of all things murky and slippery, for both fog and mud are thicker there than elsewhere. Flesh-and-blood people talk literally about the weather; writers of fiction talk metaphorically about it. If they did not, the weather would be a disconnected appendage to their story.

In other words, they really have only two choices: to leave something out of the story or to connect it to the story. So in fiction, if the writer talks about the weather at length, the weather always turns out to reflect or contrast with the action of the story. In real life there may be things that can be merely present but without significance, the way I

sometimes feel at parties where I don't know anyone, but this is not a possibility for fictional weather.

Dickens's scene is something of a tour-de-force: few people could say "What rotten weather!" with such eloquence. One wishes that the narrators of novels could be made flesh and blood, so that you could invite the narrator of *Bleak House* over for an evening of exciting chit-chat about the weather, and introduce him around. Melville's Ishmael could tell him all about sperm whales. This might sound boring, but it would not be, because for novelists boredom is death, and they go to great lengths to avoid it. They do this, as we shall see, not just by creating contrast but by creating many different types of contrast.



**Fig. 2. Contrastive coherence.**

(Courtesy Dan Piraro. © 1999 King Features Syndicate)



#### References:

1. Richardson, 5.
2. Heyn and Brier, 54.
3. Huxley, 105.
4. Knight, 124.
5. Agnew and O'Brien, 97-98.
6. Richardson, 5.
7. Dickens, *Bleak House*, 3-5.

## Chapter Three

### Is He Still the Lone Ranger If He Has a Faithful Companion?

But the ordinary saints grow faint to posterity; whilst  
quite ordinary sinners pass vividly down the ages.  
—Max Beerbohm<sup>1</sup>

It is always difficult for a writer to make  
virtuous people interesting.  
—Paul Theroux<sup>2</sup>

Imagine offering your guests many different kinds of steak for dinner, and nothing else. Eventually they would push away the *bifteck sauté à la Bordelaise* and point out that something different might be in order. “But this *is* different,” you say. “The last course was *tournedos sautés aux champignons*.” “No,” they might say, “something *really* different. Salad, maybe.” Cooks try to create not just contrasting tastes but contrasting categories of tastes as well, and different colors and textures on the plate.

Writers are in a similar position. Indeed, it is a corollary of the Principle of Contrast that the forms of contrast must themselves be diverse. The writer cannot rely on varying a single type of contrast (creating only contrasting characters, for example). It would be helpful, then, to consider some of the issues created by the need for contrast and some of the typical ways contrast can be offered up to the reader. In studying this subject, I went back and both read some of the comic books I had read as a child and listened to many of the radio plays I had listened to. While I didn’t expect to learn much from them, I came to see that the authors of these seemingly simple stories were often coping with very complex issues.



With his faithful Indian companion Tonto, the Masked Rider of the plains led the fight for law and order in the early western United States... Return with us now to those thrilling days of yesteryear. From out of the past come the thundering hoofbeats of the great horse Silver! The Lone Ranger rides again!

—*The Lone Ranger* radio plays

### 1. *Contrast of characters*

Of all the types of contrast, or drama, contrast of characters is perhaps the most obvious to us. I have already mentioned the extreme forms of contrast one sees in comedy and in the comic strips. Laurel and Hardy, Batman and Robin, Abbott and Costello—all show us characters strongly differentiated from each other in size, shape, rhetoric, and attitude. Clever is often contrasted with stupid. Lestrade is made uncommonly dense and dogmatic for a Scotland Yard inspector so that Sherlock Holmes's brilliance and flexibility stand out the more. In the Basil Rathbone series of Sherlock Holmes movies, the director made even Dr. Watson appear dull-witted and bumbling to contrast him with Holmes. (This is possible in the movies but would be a tricky choice in Conan Doyle's stories, where Watson is the narrator, so that the events are seen through his eyes.<sup>A</sup> Most of the movie versions have followed the original here.)

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the German critic and dramatist of the eighteenth century, observed (citing Diderot) that it is better if the characters in a play are merely differentiated than if they are contrasted.<sup>3</sup> But differentiation *is* contrast; it is just a less extreme form than the violent kinds of contrast in comedy. And it is to be found not only in fiction: John McPhee, in *Encounters with the Archdruid*, discusses the issue of environmentalism by showing two opposing viewpoints. Any

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A. If the reader is to be kept entertained, it is important to avoid giving a bore, or a stupid person, a leading role in a novel. When the story demands a dull main character, a competent writer usually allows a disparity between the character's behavior and his characterization. In Fontane's *Unwiederbringlich*, Holk is represented as a bit slow and limited, yet speaks and argues brilliantly—a better compromise than to allow the reader to wonder why he or she should be interested in this idiot.

point of view is more vivid if presented against the background of its opposite, which is perhaps the main reason why reporters try to get both sides of a story, although they may insist that they do this out of a sense of fairness. In journalism manuals, the issue of vividness comes up often. According to Dodge and Viner's *The Practice of Journalism*, in court reporting, "The most interesting point in the case may emerge in the middle of the prosecution story or in the middle of the defence story. This can be picked out, used at the beginning of the report, the opposite side given on this point, and the rest of the evidence summarized very briefly."<sup>4</sup> Here we see vividness presented as an organizing principle in journalism.

The issue of contrast becomes most important when a fictional character is re-used, as in a series of detective novels, and thereby risks becoming familiar and boring. Also, the hero has to be contrastable with large numbers of characters whom the writer has not even dreamed up yet. The traditional solution is to make the hero unique, distinctive, so that he can be easily set off from any possible character that he might interact with. Thus, Hercule Poirot is not English (familiar), not even French (less familiar), but Belgian (unfamiliar); he has a quaint little moustache, prissy habits, and a big ego—it would be difficult to create a character who was *not* differentiated from him. Poirot has an uneasy relationship with Inspector Japp, who is also made distinctive by accent and attitudes. In real life, we may like people who are not egotistical, but in fiction they have the distressing quality of blending in. If contrast causes vividness, then unity is boring and diversity is stimulating: saints are bland and devils are fascinating. "Sin is the writer's element," according to François Mauriac.<sup>5</sup> We want to read about Hitler and Stalin, not Mother Teresa. The *unio mystica* will never make good copy. So the fictional detective, like it or not, is an irritable creature, impatient with lesser beings: Poirot, Sherlock Holmes, Nero Wolfe. And he has habits and tics that grate on his fellow man and amuse the reader. When Holmes thinks—an inherently undramatic event—he either fills the room with clouds of smoke from his meerschaum or the fumes from chemicals or he plays the violin. Watson, of course, is so constituted as to be mildly irritated by all these phenomena.

Poirot, Holmes, Wolfe: each of them in a career that tends to isolate one. But if you isolate your character, even briefly, you risk letting contrast drop to unacceptable levels, so the traditional solution is to give the hero a partner very different from him: Captain Hastings, Watson, and Archie.

But what happens when isolation—the positive side of which is self-sufficiency—is actually the theme of a story, as it is in the western? We see the theme in such a title as *The Lone Ranger*. Here theme and narrative demands clash fearfully, and it is the latter that win out: the Lone Ranger is actually not alone at all in any conventional sense. He has his faithful companion Tonto, differentiated from him by race, manner of speaking—mostly grunts and sentence fragments—and status. Many of the stories involve their being forcibly separated and moving heaven and earth and an assortment of bulky villains to get back together. The Lone Ranger also hung around with his nephew Dan Reed, whose youth and innocence and impetuosity got him into all kinds of plot-laden difficulties. If the Lone Ranger has a nephew, he has at least one sibling. So in fact he and Silver thunder out of the past with considerable baggage. The theme requires that he be the “Lone Ranger,” while the exigencies of story-telling demand something like the “Socially Connected Ranger.”

Similarly, Little Orphan Annie was, well, alone in the world—that is the point of her name and her story. But such a theme cries out for contrastive characters. Much of the time she talked to her dog Sandy, but she also had Daddy Warbucks—who, irritatingly, kept losing her—and his associates Punjab and the Asp. The entire criminal underworld seemed bent on separating her from Warbucks, but the Principle of Contrast, all on its own, forced an abundance of differentiated characters into the little cartoon boxes where she lived and had her being. Indeed, Little Orphan Annie found her way into more homes than the average colony of termites. Sometimes she was taken in by a nice, elderly couple, discovered that they were being victimized by an evil, swarthy character with money and power, and set their lives aright before moving on in search of further adventures and the elusive Daddy Warbucks.

Paradoxically, the more you isolate your character, the more important it is for him or her to have a partner, and this is perhaps why it is the western, not the detective novel, that has provided the term for the



contrastive partner: the sidekick. And because of the writer's need for contrast, if the western hero is taciturn and brave, his partner is often timid and garrulous. Again, a name tells all: Gabby Hayes, who made a good living in the movies being whatever the western hero is not.

The mystery writer Rex Stout saw the value of the "Watson" as a character able to convey information without understanding it, so that the author's deception of the reader isn't quite so obvious.<sup>6</sup> That is, Watson can simply fail to understand the significance of what he tells the reader. This is certainly true, even though Conan Doyle wrote a successful story without Watson, "The Adventure of the Lion's Mane." Here the details that Watson would not have understood are simply supplied to the reader without explanation—we don't understand them either. But writers use the "sidekick" even where real-life or information-processing exigencies don't seem to require him. The sidekick's greatest value, surely, is his ability to act as an ambulatory fund of contrast with a main character who might otherwise be removed, by the needs of the story, from the vicinity of contrasting characters.

Writers often create the sidekick well after the hero, when they realize there is no one for the hero to talk to, as happened with Batman and Robin. And once the writer decides to provide the hero with a contrastive associate, it becomes necessary to justify his hanging around, so the sidekick may become the hero's employee or friend. Bridwell points out that, once Robin was made into Bruce Wayne's ward, this became a common method of accounting for a grown man living with a boy.<sup>7</sup> And sidekicks sometimes proliferate. In the early *Batman* comics (before the Bat-Man had lost his definite article and his hyphen), a British butler took it upon himself to come over from England and insist on working for Bruce Wayne. This was Alfred, who began as a buffoon and provided needed contrast with the Batman and Robin, then became a stereotypical butler, dignified and pompous, as he and the story aged.

In genre fiction, which is constrained by its central theme or fantasy, the differentiation of characters inevitably moves toward the cliché. Clichés have no standing in literature; we all despise them. Yet if we agree on this, why is it that writers continue to create cliché-ridden stories?

The reason is that a cliché is overused because it is the most elegant solution to the particular narrative problem the writer is confronted with, so that the writer is really choosing elegant oldness over inelegant newness.

Consider the western: the heroine *must* be strongly differentiated from the hero; otherwise they won't generate a lot of high-contrast interaction. So the author may go through calculations of this sort:

—The hero may be low in status and isolated to reflect the reader's place in society and self-image (the hero, after all, is a supercharged version of the reader). Both for contrast and to make the fantasy work out for the hero, we need a heroine who is high in status and with a fixed position. Solution: we make her the daughter of a well-off rancher.

—The typical reader is neither refined nor educated and is likely to do manual labor. Transpose this into fiction, and into the Old West, and you get a hero who is a cowpoke. The heroine, by the law of contrast, should be refined, educated, and *not* do manual labor. The cliché here is the schoolmarm from Philadelphia who, altogether too self-important, must suffer some diminution of her dignity—perhaps the hero dunks her in the water trough—before she finally comes to see that he is the man of her dreams. (I myself have never dunked any woman in a water trough, nor should you. But western heroes are expected to express themselves physically rather than through discussion and analysis and cutting remarks.)

And this brings up a dilemma of the western. Because of its romantic theme of isolation, the western typically ends with another cliché: the hero riding off into the sunset, a ride that is always best done alone. The hero's departure is not an expedition, after all: it is the pulp writer's emblem for a kind of quest into infinity, which leaves the reader with the shivery feeling that the human spirit has no boundaries, not even space and time. The point of it all is blunted if the hero takes along a lover, just as we would find it distracting if Sir Edmund Hilary had had a crowd of groupies with him when he climbed Mt. Everest. (Indeed, when I was young, we found it inconvenient to acknowledge that in fact two men had reached the summit of Everest at the same time, the other being Tenzing Norgay, Hilary's Sherpa. Nowadays many would doubtless

argue that this omission resulted from racism, but I believe it was a debt we paid to romantic fantasy.)

Most writers of westerns realize that the reader wants both cosmic self-sufficiency and a successful love story and that these are not to be reconciled. They have many ways of dealing with the problem. Often, at the end of the story, they simply wrench the hero into a new form, making him somehow become domestic and stable, as does Max Brand<sup>B</sup> in *Destry Rides Again*. But this not only does violence to the theme, it also attacks the coherence of the character, which is why it is common for the western to have two heroes, one for theme (isolation), and one for domesticity. In *The Magnificent Seven*, a young man tags along with Yul Brynner's band so that someone can act out the true-love portion of the romantic theme while the others ride off into the sunset. The young man remains behind and marries the beautiful girl. That great genius of the western, Jack Schaefer, created perhaps the most economical solution to this problem when he had Shane cast his lot with a family of homesteaders, then fall in love with the wife, Marian. Shane works for the family, putting away his gun, but his brief descent into domesticity slows him up enough, in the final gunfight, that he is wounded. The ride off—into moonlight, not sunset this time—is an especially ethereal one: "A cloud passed over the moon and he merged into the general shadow and I could not see him and the cloud passed on and the road was a plain thin ribbon to the horizon and he was gone."<sup>8</sup> The wound is no ordinary gunshot wound; it is a symbol of the sacrifice of his love for Marian. But lest we worry about Shane, one of the characters hints that the wound will not be fatal: "No bullet can kill that man."<sup>9</sup> And Shane leaves behind him a restored family that fulfills the true-love half of the equation of romantic fiction.

Here we might point out another functional cliché of the western. The western hero expresses himself physically because—for reasons we shall discuss later—he is chronically non-articulate, and therefore, in the interests of contrast, the writer sets him up against heroes who are not merely articulate but glib. Thus we get the cliché of the smooth, evil villain and the rough, good-hearted hero, as in *Destry Rides Again*. This need to contrast hero with villain, in a story in which the hero is

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B. Pen name for Frederick Faust.

inarticulate, explains why, for many years, lawyers were apt to be on the losing side in westerns. Where the hero is inarticulate but true, the (contrasting) villain is apt to be glib and insincere. The reader may protest that lawyers are not necessarily glib and insincere, but genre fiction is true to life only when nothing more important interferes. Preconceptions, prejudices, biases, and typical fantasies can all take precedence over “life” in genre fiction. It is like a lothario who wishes to have just one true love, but with many women at once.

## ***2. Contrast between expected and actual motifs***

Paradoxically, clichés provide not only a store of traditional solutions to narrative problems but a fruitful source of contrast as well. This is because the writer can let the reader expect a particular cliché, then create a deliberate contrast to it. I said that lawyers tend to be among the bad guys in the western, but because this is the cliché, authors sometimes deliberately write against it. Louis L’Amour’s stories have some lawyers who prove to be as solid and dependable as they appear at first glance. And in the film *Pulp Fiction* the experienced movie-goer just *knows* that when the prizefighter who has betrayed the mob meets his girlfriend in a motel, his enemies will surely break in on the love scene—which, by contrast, is exactly what does *not* happen.

Sometimes the practice of setting clichés against actuality—a cliché in its own right—gets out of hand, as when sportswriters repeatedly, and tiresomely, avail themselves of our assumption that anybody big and strong couldn’t be very smart, then make stories out of linebackers with law degrees and heavyweight contenders who chat easily and with authority about Nietzsche.

The dilemma of contrast is always present: anything the author does, no matter how successful, will eventually become tedious. He is like a barefoot dancer over shifting live coals—inevitably he creates new steps. Hence, because viewers of *South Park* come to expect the children to say, “Those bastards! They killed Kenny!”, the screenwriters can instead make Kenny escape certain death or have his little friends accidentally kill him themselves. The newness is coherent.

While I have presented these clichés as though they resulted from ratiocination, the reality is murkier than that. In fact, the writer is picking

over an entire tradition, and he or she can take up and use the bits and pieces that seem especially valuable, provided they can be put together into a coherent whole. As with riding a bicycle down a steep hill, it is more important that one do it well and ably than that one be able to explain how it is done.



Once the writer grasps the workings of the Principle of Contrast, it is an easy matter to create vivid characters. But that is the only thing that is easy, for the seeds of dullness are sown the moment the character is created and exposed to the reader. The author has to regenerate the reader's interest constantly; he or she can't simply let the character talk. Beginning writers often isolate their characters, then let them engage in long interior monologues. But most fictional characters—like most people—cannot engage in monologues at great length without their audience suffering from spasms of inattention. Aldous Huxley remarked on this in his *Paris Review* interview: "I know what I want to say clearly enough; the problem is how to embody the ideas. Of course, you can always talk them out in dialogue, but you can't have your characters talking indefinitely without becoming transparent—and tiresome."<sup>10</sup>

Listening to a bore, we may yawn, shift from one foot to another, gaze desperately into the distance for something—anything!—to use as an excuse for escaping, and respond with vague and mechanical nods. There is none of this studied politeness in bored readers; they are brutally direct: they close the book. So the writer has the function of the able host or hostess: to rescue the bored, create events where there were none, and pair up likely people. With a talented writer who is meticulous, this process is not even noticeable: the story seems to have a life of its own. It is when the writer is incompetent that we notice—as when a dim host puts two bores together and they compete in synchronized tedium.

Narrative incompetence often shows up in what I think of as "fake" drama. It is the voracious need for contrast that causes people in fiction initially to refuse to help those in need. Western heroes, asked to protect a town or destroy a nest of horse thieves, never say, "Well, heck, why not? After all, I was just moseying." Instead, they are provided with other, more pressing engagements, so that the writer can milk some drama from

the question, will he or won't he? And in police stories the hero often has idiots for superiors—not because there is an inverse relationship between rank and intelligence but because the writer is conscious of the need to provide the hero with as many antagonists as possible. (This is especially important if the hero is by disposition a loner: who is he to contrast with?) That way, anywhere the hero ends up—even at his desk—he may enter into the typically chaotic, tension-filled relationships of fictional characters. When you find yourself growing impatient with the childishness of the characters in a movie or novel, you may be looking at fake drama that is being used to eke out a plot that hasn't been thought out with sufficient thoroughness. Kristine Kathryn Rusch points out that “The characters should not make stupid attempts [to solve their problem]...or the readers won't follow them. We like to read about people as smart as or smarter than ourselves.”<sup>11</sup> A simple enough rule, but one that is hard to keep in mind when the writer is trying to present the reader with constant drama.

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A fictional police officer is apt to have chaotic personal relationships as well—an angry ex-wife, a sullen girl friend. As Raymond Chandler points out, “Love interest nearly always weakens a mystery because it introduces a type of suspense that is antagonistic to the detective's struggle to solve a problem.”<sup>12</sup> Our demand for coherence requires that the women's anger not be irrelevant to the story, which is why the author, obeying Chandler's dictum, typically causes them to be angry with him because he pays more attention to his criminals than to his lover. That way, even as he gets closer to one goal (catching the criminal), he gets further from the other (staying close to his lover). (If they were angry with him because of his compulsive gambling, then the gambling would have to be made into an intrinsic part of the story.) The chaotic personal relationships presumably have a basis in reality: police work is notoriously hard on policemen. But even if it is “true,” it is also valuable for drama, which leads one to believe that if all the real police officers in the world miraculously healed all their psychological wounds, the police officers in fiction would continue to have stormy relationships with their lovers.

Paradoxically, characters have the greatest potential for contrast when they either alter their attitudes too quickly and easily or hang on to

them tenaciously in inappropriate circumstances. Flatterers and insincere people thrive in fiction; they are in a sense self-contrastive, because they present a public face at odds with the private one shown to the reader. In E. F. Benson's *Miss Mapp*, the main character, Elizabeth Mapp, asks a question of her friend Diva, knowing that it will be awkward for Diva to answer it, and so she must lie. When Diva does lie, Miss Mapp is gratified: "'Liar,' thought Miss Mapp, as she tripped downstairs... 'Liar,' she thought again as she kissed her hand to Diva, who was looking gloomily out of the window."<sup>13</sup> This two-faced quality, high in contrast, has many forms. In the same novel, we are told that Miss Mapp "liked to collect all the men round her, and then scold them for not talking to the other ladies."<sup>14</sup>

Here we see the character's two attitudes contrasted with each other. Alternately, the writer can create characters who always and invariably say and do the *same* things, but in different circumstances. Readers of Theodor Fontane are familiar with the pastors in his novels who bring up ancient history or archaeology at every opportunity, whether it is appropriate or not. Both these types of character—the insincere and the obviously obsessive—tend toward the comic, for, as we shall see later, humor depends heavily on high contrast and conflicting forms of coherence.

Both types are more common as minor than as major characters in a novel. We don't need to take people seriously to laugh at them, but it is asking a lot to expect a reader to follow the career of a silly person who lacks redeeming qualities. There is too much of a disproportion between investment and return—like hiring a big-game hunter to track down an escaped hamster. If we are to put together a safari, we demand a substantial return on our investment. So the sillier a main character is, the more important it is for him or her to have endearing qualities: Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster is impossibly foolish but wonderfully appealing and good-hearted. And like all fictional characters, no matter how vapid his ideas, he acts with purpose and will, since a story will collapse like a soufflé in a cement mixer if the characters give up easily. The paradox—weak character, strong will—is solved by causing Bertie to be threatened by characters of such awesome force, for instance his Aunt Agatha, that he has no choice but to act, with or without the aid of Jeeves.

Writers of satire, who are creating a fictional world to make fun of the real world, are thus presented with a dilemma: a world without value is not worth reading about. Because of this, satirists typically present the absurd world to a main character of sturdily normal qualities, which is why Gulliver, in the novel we have nick-named *Gulliver's Travels*, is *not* bizarre like everything else in the novel. Similarly, Evelyn Waugh's central characters, the ones through whose consciousness the events of the story are seen, are invariably his most straightforward characters. Readers must be provided with *terra firma* if they are to be comfortable exploring a bizarre fictional world.



Aujourd'hui, maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas.  
Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know.  
—Camus<sup>15</sup>

### 3. *Contrast of expected and actual style*

The quotation from Camus is a famous example of this type of contrast. We expect the narrator to know whether it was today or yesterday that his mother died, and we expect more affect from him. This particular form of contrast is most pronounced in humor. In his *Paris Review* interview, James Thurber said, "Someone once wrote a definition of the difference between English and American humor... He said that the English treat the commonplace as if it were remarkable and the Americans treat the remarkable as if it were commonplace."<sup>16</sup> I would suggest that, while this may indeed be a tendency, it is virtually a law of nature that humor deliberately puts material and rhetorical style together in a contrastive manner. That is, the mundane is treated with high-flown, pompous rhetoric and the majestic is treated with rhetoric appropriate to the mundane. F. Scott Fitzgerald says, "Reporting the extreme things as if they were the average things will start you on the art of fiction."<sup>17</sup> And Mark Twain routinely chooses a high style or a low according to whichever is not appropriate to the material; that is why he is funny.

Edgar Allan Poe, in "The Philosophy of Composition," makes some observations on style and its uses that are worth considering:



I prefer commencing with the consideration of an *effect*. Keeping originality *always* in view—for he is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable a source of interest—I say to myself, in the first place, ‘Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?’ Having chosen a novel, first, and secondly, a vivid effect, I consider whether it can best be wrought by incident or tone—whether by ordinary incidents and peculiar tone, or the converse, or by peculiarity both of incident and tone—afterward looking about me (or rather within) for such combinations of event, or tone, as shall best aid me in the construction of the effect.<sup>18</sup>

Poe points out here that originality is a source of interest. If the specialists in cognition are right, this is because the new is highly contrastive. An author seeking to hold his or her audience, then, is obliged either to choose new material or to treat it in a new way. So, for example, in *Futurama* Matt Groening chose to rejuvenate the old romantic fantasies by flinging a nerd from 2000 AD a thousand years forward. There he finds a highly mixed and variable society of humans, animals, robots, and monsters (which provide high contrast)—all of whom have noticeably human traits (providing coherence), which are distributed piecemeal among them.

Poe goes on to make what we might view as a distinction without a difference: “Having chosen a novel, first, and secondly a vivid effect...” An effect gains its vividness largely from its novelty: age robs only some men of their hair, but it robs all sensory perceptions of their luster.

By “tone” Poe clearly means what would nowadays be called “style.” He is saying, then, that you should put together ordinary style and peculiar incidents, or peculiar style and ordinary incidents. He allows a third possibility: peculiar style and peculiar incidents, but not the fourth permutation, the combination of ordinary style and ordinary incidents, since this would not only introduce the reader to the known—hence drab—but lack a contrast between style and incident.

It is easy to find examples of these types of contrast in Poe’s writings, and we must repeat that the most striking examples—as with everything that is highly contrastive—are apt to be humorous. In this next passage Poe uses a tense, elaborate style of a sort that, if styles were

displayed in bins at a stationery store, a newspaper reporter might purchase with an eye toward one day addressing the arrival of the Apocalypse:

No one knew; no one could imagine; no one—not even the burgomaster Mynheer Superbus Von Underduk—had the slightest clew by which to unravel the mystery; so, as nothing more reasonable could be done, every one to a man replaced his pipe carefully in the corner of his mouth, and maintaining an eye steadily upon the phenomenon, puffed, paused, waddled about, and grunted significantly—then waddled back, grunted, paused, and finally—puffed again.<sup>19</sup>

Peculiar tone: ordinary incident.

Even exhausted rhetorical styles can be put to good use if they are treated with irony. In *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the director made fun of the practice—normal in the musical, uncommon in real life—of interrupting the action to let the characters sing a song. Except that here the characters go from one style into the other with just a bit too much verve and dramatic flair, so that it is clear that they are making fun of a convention. One moment a drab and serious couple is standing in a churchyard, engaged in conversation; their gestures are subdued. The next moment, and on the slightest pretext, they begin to belt out a song in classic Broadway style, with flamboyant gestures. It is as if a demure nun suddenly began to sashay like Mae West. The transition is instantaneous: from low-energy and realistic to high-energy and bombastic. We might see this as a break in styles (a violation of coherence: bad), rather than as contrast (a source of vividness: good), except that the ironic treatment reminds us that we are looking at an accepted convention. Also, if the break were not overdone, it would not be vivid: it is, after all, conventional, therefore known, therefore dull. Irony never loses its popularity among authors because it *always* contains contrast, since the face value of an ironic observation is by definition at odds with the author's attitude toward it.

#### **4. *Deliberate misinterpretation of events, motives, etc.***

Writers often inject contrast into their text by giving an obviously fanciful interpretation of material the reader is familiar with. The fanciful

and prosaic versions then create a vivid contrast, as in this passage from Mark Twain, where he illustrates the bellicosity of a character by representing it as courteousness:

He was a fine, brave, majestic creature, a gentleman according to the nicest requirements of the Virginian rule, a devoted Presbyterian, an authority on the ‘code,’ and a man always courteously ready to stand up before you in the field if any act or word of his had seemed doubtful or suspicious to you, and explain it with any weapon you might prefer from brad-awls to artillery.<sup>20</sup>

This is an especially effective example, since the duel is, after all, traditionally justified by highly civilized concepts such as “honor.” The narrator pretends to accept this notion, exaggerates the civility a bit—note the magnanimity in the choice of weapons—and leaves it to the reader to notice that what is really at issue is pugnacity. Thus a physical attack becomes an explanation. To create vividness where there is no new information, Twain gives us a deliberately skewed interpretation of the *old* information. He also groups together objects that, by themselves familiar to the reader, are usually not put into the same category: brad-awls and artillery. These are deliberate extremes—the one too humble, the other too grand for dueling. Obligated to use old words, Twain gives us a new *category*, putting the old words into new relationships with one another. Contrast and coherence work together here: brad-awls and artillery as dueling weapons—that is new to us; but each is at least a conceivable weapon. Twain does not suggest, say, cornhusks and corset stays, which would form a new and vivid category but a nonsensical one, and one that does not put its contents at opposite ends of a continuum.



But what pleasure can it possibly be to a man of culture, when either a puny human being is mangled by a most powerful beast, or a splendid beast is transfixed with a hunting spear? And even if all this is something to be seen, you have seen it more than once; and I, who was a spectator, saw nothing new in it.

—Cicero<sup>21</sup>

### 5. *Contrast of moods, styles, and tempos*

Beginning writers, and some experienced ones as well, sometimes fail to understand the implications of the Principle of Contrast. It is not intense drama per se that is at issue, it is contrast. Writers often focus so intently on creating conflict among their characters that they fail to notice that conflict itself can become dull if unvaried—as François Hédelin, the seventeenth-century French critic, notes: “Violent passions too often repeated do, as it were, numb the soul and its sympathy: the multitude of incidents and intrigues distract the mind and confound the memory...”<sup>22</sup>

Cicero’s remarks on the spectacle in the Coliseum are ironic, yet they convey a sense of how insatiable the human appetite for sensation is, and how dependent it is on variation. The fact is, there is nothing so spectacular that it cannot become boring with exposure. Creating intense and unvaried conflict is like pouring Tabasco sauce on all your food alike—the green beans, the prime rib, and the chocolate mousse—and expecting the flavors to be enhanced. In fact, by giving them all the *same* flavor—even if it is a lively one—you would cause your taste to cloy more quickly rather than less.

One sometimes sees this problem in action movies, where the director feels confident that the audience cannot possibly be bored if enough villains are shot, stabbed, garroted, and thrown from tall buildings. I have watched such movies and thought to myself, “Don’t they ever get tired? *I* am.” As Raymond Chandler pointed out, “The overplotted story can be dull too; too much shock may result in numbness to shock.”<sup>23</sup> The best directors, such as the directors of the James Bond movies, have a keen sense of their audience’s sensory-saturation and vary the dramatic with the idyllic. Bond’s sexual escapades not only fill out the viewer’s fantasies nicely; they also alter the level of dramatic intensity and give our senses time to recover their edge. Quite simply, if Bond were never out of danger, and if the level of excitement never went down—we would get bored.

Because the need for contrast stems from the very mechanisms by which our brains apprehend information, the list of useful contrastive features can be extended almost indefinitely in moving from one narrative medium to another. Thus in choreography the audience appreciates variations of fast/slow, circle/line, loud/soft, high/low, solo/couple/group,

lyrical/jerky, serious/humorous, abstract/narrative, and so on. Similarly, because Tim Burton made his film *Sweeney Todd* so dark, he could amaze the audience with what would otherwise seem like normal color and brightness, to show Todd's early joy in his marriage.

Indeed, however different genres may be, they remain dependent on human cognition, so it is no surprise to find that film directors too must seek ways of creating contrast. Sergei Eisenstein describes some specific types of contrast available to the movie-maker, although he uses the term "conflict":

*Conflict of graphic directions.*

*(Lines—either static or dynamic)*

*Conflict of scales.*

*Conflict of volumes.*

*Conflict of masses*

*(Volumes filled with various intensities of light)*

*Conflict of depths...*

*Close shots and long shots.*

*Pieces of darkness and pieces of lightness...*

*Conflicts between an object and its dimension—and conflicts between an event and its duration.*

This last may sound strange, but both are familiar to us. The first is accomplished by an optically distorted lens, and the second by stop-motion or slow-motion.<sup>24</sup>

From the point of view of cognition, conflict is clearly just a sub-category of contrast. It is contrast with an admixture of willfulness—an intense form of contrast.

There are many other types of contrast. Writers commonly contrast appearance and reality, or what the Germans call *Schein und Sein*. We shall see examples of this in a later chapter. In the bestseller the most favored form of information is that which corrects—hence is contrastive with—the reader's *misinformation*. The bestseller is awash in information because it typically builds its story around an institution that touches the lives of most people but that the reader is not very familiar with. It then seeks to give an insider's view of that industry, so that the details are fresh and new even if the subject isn't. Thus Arthur Hailey wrote books with

titles such as *Wheels* (about Detroit), *Airport*, and *Hotel*. I remember a reviewer joking that his next big book would be called *Shopping Center*.

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We have seen again in our brief discussion of Mark Twain's rhetoric how difficult it is to talk about contrast without bringing up coherence. And as it has insinuated itself into the discussion, we shall consider it in detail in the next chapter. But first a warning: it must be clear by now that contrast is a bit of a ruffian, always most comfortable with dissonance and division, and possessed of many forms and voices. We might expect coherence, then, to be sleek and unified, with a single voice. Paradoxically, nothing could be further from the truth: coherence has many forms, and these get into a tangle with each other as much as they do with contrast itself.

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## References:

1. Beerbohm, 84.
2. Theroux, 86.
3. Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, II, 697; Stück 86. ["Diderot hat recht: Es ist besser, wenn die Charaktere bloß verschieden, als wenn sie kontrastiert sind. Kontrastierte Charaktere sind minder natürlich und vermehren den romantischen Anstrich, an dem es den dramatischen Begebenheiten so schon selten fehlt."]
4. Dodge and Viner, 90.
5. Mauriac, 35.
6. Stout, "What to Do About a Watson," in Treat, 133-5.
7. Bridwell, *Batman from the 30s to the 70s*, 12.
8. Schaefer, 113-14.
9. Schaefer, 115.
10. Huxley, in *Writers at Work* (1957), 199.
11. Kristine Kathryn Rusch, "Anatomy of a Sale: 'Mom's Little Friends' to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*," in Tompkins, 355.
12. Chandler, quoted in Winokur, 39.
13. Benson, 64.
14. Benson, 36.
15. Camus, 9.
16. Thurber, in *Writers at Work* (1957), 95-6.
17. Fitzgerald, quoted in Winokur, 44.
18. Poe, "Philosophy of Composition," *Essays and Reviews*, 13-14.
19. Poe, "Adventure of Hans Pfaall," *Complete Tales*, 3-4.
20. Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, in *Mississippi Writings*, 919.
21. Cicero, *The Letters to His Friends*, vol. II, 7.
22. Hédelin, quoted in Clark, 95.
23. Chandler, 36.
24. Eisenstein, "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram," in Mast and Cohen, 99. See also Bruce Kawin's "The Mummy's Pool," pp. 469-71 of Mast and Cohen, for a series of "oppositions" in two horror movies, such as "army vs. scientists." It must be stressed that Eisenstein and Kawin are looking at the same phenomenon, even if they are looking at very different manifestations of it and using different terms.

## Chapter Four

### *E pluribus unum, ex uno plures*

Why *shouldn't* truth be stranger than fiction? Fiction, after all, has to make sense.

—Mark Twain <sup>1</sup>

The fable [of the *Vicar of Wakefield*] is indeed one of the worst that ever was constructed. It wants, not merely that probability which ought to be found in a tale of common English life, but that consistency which ought to be found even in the wildest fiction about witches, giants, and fairies.

—Macaulay's Life of Goldsmith <sup>2</sup>

[A good story] should have coherence and sufficient probability for the needs of the theme...

—Somerset Maugham <sup>3</sup>

If contrast were all the reader required, the writer could simply create a completely new fictional world, with a new language, a different universe, a stunningly unique psychology for the characters, and heretofore neglected techniques of narration. Halfway through, a story might be flipped like a great narrative pancake and told from the middle back to the beginning. But even science fiction doesn't do all this; such an enterprise wouldn't "make sense" to the reader. If writers did this, our demand for newness, or contrast, would run smack-bang into our demand for coherence, causing severe narrative casualties. When writers and critics demand consistency, coherence, and probability, as do Macaulay and Maugham in the epigraphs above, they are surely making one demand rather than three, for probability is merely consistency with the laws of the known world, and both are forms of coherence. And Macaulay's remark about fiction dealing with witches, giants and fairies reminds us that we



allow writers to expand the limits of “probability” at will—the one proviso being that they notify us in advance.

The discussion over what “makes sense,” and how to stay within its boundaries, began very early. In drama we refer to this as “dramatic unity,” and it was Aristotle who started a long and intense debate over the particular form that it should take. In the Renaissance, his views on the matter were expanded by Castelvetro into a dictum that, in addition to unity of action, a play should have unity of place and time: it should take place in a single location and during the course of a single day. This dictum forces on us the oxymoron “unities”—*unity*, surely, shouldn’t have a plural. Theoreticians of the stage even debated occasionally whether this day was twelve or twenty-four hours in length.

The unities have a tremendous effect on the form of a play (they determine what kind of plotting one uses, for example, as we shall see later), but it is evident that, as with much theorizing, the one-day limit has little to do with how playwrights actually write plays when left alone by dramatic theorists. In fact it is terribly inconvenient to obey the unities of time and place; in our “real life” experience, dramatic events don’t huddle together in time and space like a herd of sheep in the rain. Why, then, did so many dramatists and literary theoreticians defend the unities? Strangely enough, they invariably did so with the argument that the unities were “true to life”:

**Lodovico Castelvetro:** “There is no possibility of making the spectators believe that many days and nights have passed [in the course of a drama], when they themselves obviously know that only a few hours have actually elapsed; they refuse to be so deceived.”<sup>4</sup>

**Sir Philip Sidney:** “Now ye shall have three ladies walk to gather flowers and then we must believe the stage to be a garden. By and by we hear news of shipwreck in the same place, and then we are to blame if we accept it not for a rock. Upon the back of that comes out a hideous monster with fire and smoke, and then the miserable beholders are bound to take it for a cave. While in the meantime two armies fly in, represented with four swords and bucklers, and then what hard heart will not receive it for a pitched field?”<sup>5</sup>

**Jean Chapelain:** “All this is a necessary corollary to the verisimilar, without which the mind is neither moved nor persuaded.”<sup>6</sup>

But if the unities were defended as “true to life,” then how were they attacked when they became unpopular? As it happens, defense and attack were based on the same argument: the unities were now attacked as *untrue* to life:

**François Ogier:** “[The ancients] cause a number of incidents and encounters to take place in one and the same day, which probably cannot have happened in such a short space of time.”<sup>7</sup>

**Tirso de Molina (Gabriel Tellez):** “What if these Masters did maintain that a play must represent an action which could logically take place within twenty-four hours? What greater inconvenience can there be than that within that short time a discreet galant should fall in love with a prudent lady, court her, make love to her, woo her—all within a single day, if you please, and after claiming her for the morrow, must needs marry her that very night?”<sup>8</sup>

**Jean Racine:** “But what sort of truth to life is there when within the space of one day a multitude of things happen that would in actual life occupy many weeks?”<sup>9</sup>

**John Dryden:** “...the *French* poets are often forc’d upon absurdities: for if the Act begins in a chamber, all the persons in the Play must have some business or other to come thither, or else they are not to be shown that Act, and sometimes their characters are very unfitting to appear there; As, suppose it were the Kings bed-chamber, yet the meanest man in the Tragedy must come and dispatch his business there, rather than in the Lobby or Courtyard (which is fitter for him), for fear the Stage should be clear’d and the Scenes broken.”<sup>10</sup>

Viewed as a cognitive demand, rather than as a group of mechanical rules, unity looks very different. If we accept the argument of the cognitive specialists that the left brain insists on making sense of the world—a central thesis of Michael Gazzaniga’s *The Social Brain*—then the unities of the dramatists resolve themselves into an attempt to placate the mind and to accommodate its demands. The left brain is to be given what it wants: a world that—unlike the real world—makes sense. It is, after all, the part of the brain in which not just language but also logic is located, and it appears as if we can’t use the one without engaging the other—that is, the use of language itself may be inextricably bound up with the need to find or create coherence. They are related tools: it is as if

you were to pick up a hammer and a bunch of nails came with it. In the real world, dictators vandalize an entire country, loot its treasury, and then leave it in disarray to retire—in a foreign country, naturally—and enjoy the fruits of their labors. The left brain will not put its imprimatur on such a world; it demands balance and sense. In its world, events have meaning, and there are no accidents. In the world of the left brain, such malefactors would be haunted by the furies until they came to a bad end, and an especially ironic one at that, because irony is merely a form of coherence with a sharp point.

But if it is our consciousness that is at the bottom of the demand for unity, it will be seen that this demand is a *generic* one, not a specific one. The point is not that you fix your story in place and time; it is that you keep the left brain from throwing up its hands in despair at the incoherence of your story. The author's objective is to make the story hang together—no matter whether it is held together by thumbtacks or sticking plasters.

Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz, the eighteenth-century storm-and-stress dramatist, expressed this well: "I would like to give you a hundred unities, which after all always remain just the *one*. Unity of language, unity of religion, unity of customs... Always the same, always and forever the same. The author and the public must feel but not classify the one unity. God is only one in all his works, and the poet must be so also, however large or small his circle of influence may be."<sup>11</sup>



In the evening, she proposed that the three of them should visit the Pitt theatre, in Stench Street, Seven Dials, to see a new play by Brandt Slurb called "Manallalive-O!" a Neo-Expressionist attempt to give dramatic form to the mental reactions of a man employed as a waiter in a restaurant who dreams that he is the double of another man who is employed as a steward on a liner, and who, on awakening and realising that he is still a waiter employed in a restaurant and not a steward employed on a liner, goes mad and shoots his reflection in a mirror and dies. It had seventeen scenes and only one character.

—Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm*<sup>12</sup>

The need for unity is most easily seen if we violate it: imagine a short story of 2,500 words in which you have two dozen characters, and the events take place in three countries over a period of thirty years. Your editor would demand that you toss away most of your characters, wipe out all but one location in one country, of which only scant amounts would actually be shown, and squinch the thirty years down to present time plus a few odd memories for the sake of narrative convenience. The reader may point out that the problem here is too much material, not too little unity; but these amount to the same thing. Unity and material are matched like a bread pan and dough. If the baker has too much dough for the pan, he doesn't pile it into the pan anyway: he either gets a bigger pan or he makes a smaller loaf. If we do not cut our material down so as to make it fit into a short story, then we must put it into a novella, or a novel, or even a series of novels. If you have unity, you can never have too much material, and if you have too much material, you can never have unity. Here again, unity is at odds with contrast: for the demands of contrast, the playwright might wish to have many characters on stage, all going in different directions, which would lead of course to chaos. For the demands of unity, the writer would want just one, declaiming a monologue in which time and space and the wills of men and gods all merge nicely—but this would kill all vividness, and perhaps the audience as well.

In practice, playwrights compromise in a predictable way: they limit sharply the number of divergent viewpoints available at any given time, which means that most scenes have two or three or four characters, and that, when there are crowds, these usually take a coherent stance with respect to the events of the play. (For vividness there might be one character—say a belligerent drunk—who is out of step with the rest.) The “rule” that governed the number of characters on stage in Greek drama—from Thespis to Sophocles the number went from one to three—surely came into being through trial and error and is derived, ultimately, from the sensory experience of dramatists and audiences.

It is easier to see how this could happen if we pretend that Athenian drama did not grow out of religious observances but was obliged to earn its way by holding the attention of the spectators. Before Aeschylus and

Sophocles and Euripides and Agathon there was a terrible playwright, Kakon of Kimolos—an earthy fellow previously involved in the wool industry—whose first effort was a long philosophical monologue, *Monotonia*, that expressed the mystical oneness of all creation.

The critics were not kind to Kakon; they suggested that nothing much happened in his play and he had only one idea. The nicest remark was by the writer for the Athenian *Ephemeris*, who thanked Kakon a bit too profusely for curing his insomnia.

And Kakon got the message. His second play, *O Peripeteia!*, a tragicomedy, told the history of the world in ten acts, with three or four choruses bellowing out lyrical stasima and a variety of sub-plots that nicely incorporated the fates of several important kings and heroes. The play had a full complement of deities and giants, but Kakon was especially proud of the tap-dancing orchestra dressed up to represent the Fates, the Furies, and all the main characters from the Trojan War. Ajax had a fake dagger stuck in his chest and fake blood running down his tunic.

But how can you satisfy theater critics? Again they were rude. And this time the writer for the Athenian *Ephemeris* observed that the next time he wanted his senses tortured, rather than go to one of Kakon's plays he would simply glue his ear to an anvil while a blacksmith hammered out wagon-fittings.

Kakon never got a chance to put on a third play, which may be why you've never heard of him. But if he had, he might have learned to balance the demands of unity against the demands of contrast. In time, no doubt, he would have settled on putting more than one person on stage at a time, and no more than—a few.

The unities of time and place are in fact real sources of coherence in a story, however badly they have been discredited by dramatists of the past who slavishly observed mechanical forms of them rather than looking for the sense behind them. Writers of short stories do not casually allow their events and characters to jump around in space and time.<sup>A</sup> If they do, editors are quick to restrain them. But the longer the story is, the more

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A. Erle Stanley Gardner showed much concern for the unities of time and place (see *Fugate and Fugate*, 166), and probably not because he was influenced by Renaissance dramatic theory.

these two forms of coherence get in a tangle with another form of coherence: the expectation that the events of a story make some sort of logical or “real world” sense. There is probably no more common criticism—from the public, the people who pay for movies and literature—than that a story is not “true to life.”

The question of how a story can be “true to life” is by no means simple. It is after all not “life” in the raw that we want in our stories: that is abundant, all around us, and if we were especially fond of it, we would probably not seek to escape it by going into a movie theater. “True-to-life” is slightly different from the raw material of life. “True-to-life” appears to mean that the writer, while constructing a fantasy for our amusement, stays within a fairly broad range of probability and prepares the audience in advance for those events that defy probability outright. Imagine that James Bond is trying to save the world from a conspiracy to turn all the newspapers into gossip tabloids, and he is caught in a trap by the evil Dr. Whowhatwhenwhere. Bond may still save himself by using a miniaturized, voice-activated rocket launched from his boutonniere, its warhead carrying nerve gas that he alone has been immunized against—but the audience will allow this *only* if it has been informed in advance that this is what is currently in style for the well-dressed secret agent. That is why the secret weapon is always shown to Bond—and the audience—early in the story, and well before it is put to use. The writer cannot say, “It might seem as if Bond has rather come a cropper, but did I tell you about the little rocket he carries on his lapel?” Roger Ebert, in an essay on movie clichés, calls this the “Law of Economy of Instruction: Nobody is ever taught anything in a movie that they are not later called upon to use.”<sup>13</sup> But it’s the other way around: no one is allowed to use anything that hasn’t been introduced earlier—a simple means of banning the (arbitrary, hence incoherent) *deus ex machina*. Peter Heck, in an article on trends and genres in science fiction, gives a clear statement of this issue: “If the key to solving the crime lies in some esoteric future gadget or some strange characteristic of the environment, that has to be made clear to the reader at an early stage—preferably without tipping off the fact that it’s a clue.”<sup>14</sup>

With such early seeding, the possibilities for foiling the reader’s notions of probability are truly stunning. In William Goldman’s *The*

*Princess Bride*, the author actually allows the hero, Westley, to be *murdered*. This is generally considered inadvisable, as a dead hero is lacking in most of the qualities that keep a story moving forward. But the narrator has casually mentioned a fellow named Miracle Max, who had been fired by the villain, and the hero's friends take Westley's body to Max, whose very name promises a narrative solution, and all turns out nicely. The reader can scarcely complain about a miracle when such was posited early on by the narrator. Like all successful techniques, this one wasn't just left to die by the writers: it came up again in the movie *Galaxy Quest*, where the heroes are provided with a brief space/time cushion that allows them to be shot down without suffering more than a thirteen-second indisposition.

The boundaries of the "true-to-life" demand are subject to wild fluctuations. It is, in fact, astonishing what the audience will put up with without invoking the "true-to-life" clause. You can show a character doing something the audience regards as contrary to nature—turning down a fortune, for example. Robert Redford's character does this at the end of *The Sting*, observing that he would simply squander his share of the money anyway. Some people might view this as a reason for accepting money, not for turning it down. But the character, and the movie, are clearly improved by the incident, for the movie might otherwise come a bit too close to celebrating naked greed—and its point is revenge, not greed. Yet even if the movie-goers, greedheads all, do not believe that Robert Redford's character would turn down the money, they will still not turn to one another and mutter skeptically, "Oh, sure!" This is because it is not the improbable per se that offends them: it is the improbable being used to hold the story together. If the character's decision were the linchpin that held *The Sting* together, the audience would not accept it at all unless the director had carefully prepared them for it.

Our need to see fiction in terms of real-life causes and effects appears to be at root a function of how our brains are constructed. According to Jeremy Campbell, "Putting a disconnected world together by explaining it in terms of effects and causes may be as natural to us as breathing. If the world does not provide coherent information, the mind is apt to impose its own coherence on the world, with an abundance of explanations, and it does so almost of necessity, because of the way the

brain is engineered, just as the nature of memory, and the mind's ability to amplify impoverished data, are determined by fundamental features of the brain's design."<sup>15</sup> In other words, our minds reject incoherence the way the body, if its immune system is not inhibited, may reject a new kidney. The writer, then, has to create enough meaning and consistency and logic and coherence and "reality" in his or her work to satisfy the reader's mind and inhibit the rejection response.

The issue is complicated by the fact that—as is now well known—the mind is by no means an inert receptor of information. If it were a computer, it would be a computer that insisted on its own notions of grammar and spelling and rephrased your ideas.<sup>B</sup> "Memory traces in the brain are dynamic objects trying to impose themselves on input," according to James McClelland. "When a particular piece of information comes into the system, it tends to wake up the traces that it is similar to. And when they get woken up, they try to tell the input what it should be. Memory traces feed back into the input."<sup>16</sup> If this is so, it suggests that the brain's center of coherence would begin to fibrillate if the work of art were too alien. (This was originally the case with paintings by Salvador Dali—paintings which we now have seen so often that we barely notice them.) A piece of fiction, then, is probably most likely to be successful if it is familiar enough to make sense and new enough to be stimulating.

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I said that long stories make it difficult for authors to hold to the unities of time and place. This is most easily seen if you imagine Tolstoy abiding by these unities in the writing of *War and Peace*. *War and Peace* has characters in gross lots; Tolstoy's muse didn't give birth, she spawned. All these characters would be obliged either to show up at one place, during a twenty-four-hour (or twelve-hour) period, or they could appear only in the thoughts and anecdotes of the characters who *did* show up at that time and place. There would be phalanxes of messengers waiting to be heard, bringing in crucial information, and the narrator might feel obliged to invent a great, sprawling bivouac to put them up in. The reader would feel quite squashed by something as large as the Napoleonic Wars

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B. Well after I wrote this sentence, I started using a new version of Microsoft Word whose grammatical meddler quickly trashed a passage from Dostoevsky.



if it shoehorned itself into a teensy little point of time and space. Wars, after all, go where they like and do what they like; that is part of their charm. Putting *War and Peace* into one time and place would be like putting a Patton tank into your swimming pool: it would still be big and awesome, but it wouldn't go anywhere.

With long stories, writers look for other kinds of unity—enough kinds, again, to keep the reader's unruly left brain from throwing spit-wads. In Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, for example, besides the heightened, intense mood of the novel, which is all of a piece, there is a single direction of movement, toward Addie Bundren's burial place. The characters—all but Jewel—are paying only lip service to their goal, which is to bury Addie in her family plot. But everything is lopped off the story that is not, ultimately, about the one event: what happened when they went to bury Addie Bundren. The moving force behind the events is Anse Bundren, Addie's widower, who is both shiftless and selfish, except that even shiftless people in fiction cannot be without force, since otherwise they will not power the story forward. So probability gives way to a narrative demand: Anse is a shiftless, lazy soul who nonetheless drags Addie's coffin through flood and fire until he gets what he wants—not so much his wife's burial as a new wife and a new set of dentures. In drama, where the audience cannot lay down the story and pick it up later, this demand for energetic characters is even more striking. We see Hamlet as an indecisive character, but Hamlet is really a compromise: a waffling character fashioned by a playwright who knows that characters can't waffle and still generate a lot of contrast. So Hamlet is brutal and direct when action is required. He is an indecisive intellectual only when pondering his fate: when the plot demands, he skewers people through curtains.

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Mood, style, and tempo are all possible sources of contrast that don't necessarily violate the laws of coherence. Let us imagine that a writer goes from a wistful, haunting mood laced with elegiac images to an intense mood fraught with suspense. The reader will accept this if the change of moods makes sense. If the change is unrelated to the story, it violates the Principle of Coherence even as it gratifies the Principle of Contrast, and as much is lost as is gained. But if the change derives from

the internal workings of the story, and is not just a convenience to the writer, then much is gained, for the reader is given a new source of contrast without feeling a drastic loss of coherence. Thus, Faulkner, in *The Sound and the Fury*, gives us different aspects of the history of a family in the words of different characters. The voice of Benji, the idiot, is flat and without affect; the voice of Quentin, who will commit suicide, is distant and haunted; the voice of Jason is angry and brittle and self-obsessed; the voice of Dilsey is matter-of-fact and straightforward.

First-person limited narration—telling the story from the point of view of a single character, and moving from one character to another—has surely become popular because it introduces contrast without a serious loss of coherence. But there are many potential narrators who might be entertaining when used briefly, deadly when used at length. Think of the most pompous bore you have ever seen or heard of. (You may have thought of the same former television personality I thought of, but we don't want to embarrass his memory by naming him, do we?) Now imagine him as the narrator of an entire novel. As narrator, he would knock your socks off for three pages, but after ten pages you would quietly pull your socks back on. And after another ten your cerebellum would start to unravel from the strain of listening to that merciless drone interrupted by pompous boasting. If he sought work as narrator in a novel, he would have to go to an agency for temps.

We can safely say, then, that first-person limited narration has advantages and disadvantages with respect to omniscient narration. Its great advantage is that it can put to use quirky narrators who are briefly interesting but would drive us to distraction if we had to remain in their presence very long. This gives it a huge advantage in contrast, and, once this is an accepted form of narration, no real loss of unity. Omniscient narration, on the other hand, besides its unified point of view, has the significant advantage that there is no need to account for the narrator's knowledge: his omniscience is simply posited by the author, and the reader accepts it as a convention. A third form of narration, which uses a single limited narrator, has its own pluses and minuses. Give it a plus in coherence and vividness (the omniscient narrator is impersonal by comparison) but a minus for the complications it can cause in getting information to the narrator. The narrator cannot be everywhere and know

everything. We see this problem in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, where Ishmael occasionally appears to forget that he is first-person limited rather than omniscient, as in Chapter XCIX, where he somehow gets close enough to hear Ahab, Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask, one after the other, muttering to themselves in front of the doubloon nailed to the mast.

*Moby-Dick* ends with the whale destroying the ship and the people on it. But Melville is aware that it is a crew-member who is telling the story, and he knows that the reader may begin to ruminate over how the story got told by someone who was lost at sea. Like James Bond, Ishmael can't be miraculously saved, even if the story depends on it, unless his salvation is seeded earlier in the text. And now, in the last line of the novel, we learn why the Pequod, prophetically named after an extinct race of Indians, had encountered the Rachel, named after the woman who wept for her children, and would not be comforted, for they were not.<sup>17</sup> "On the second day, a sail drew near, nearer, and picked me up at last. It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan."<sup>18</sup>



Genius all over the world stands hand in hand, and one  
shock of recognition runs the whole circle round.

—Melville<sup>19</sup>

Invention...does not consist in creating out of void, but  
out of chaos.

—Mary Shelley<sup>20</sup>

Like vendors in a bazaar, coherence and contrast do not always compete; sometimes they cooperate. Melville has expressed this nicely in the expression "the shock of recognition." If you recognize something, it is old to you and might therefore seem inevitably lacking in contrast, but the moment of recognition can be dramatic—that is, contrastive. An evocative title, such as *The Sound and the Fury*, could be seen as a form of coherence, in that it gives meaning to the story and connects it to the reader's literary experience. But if you are struck by its aptness, or

charmed by the literary allusion, it could also be seen as highly contrastive. Faulkner's title proves remarkably compact, for most readers will recognize its origins in *Macbeth* ("a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"—a daring opening, by the way, to a book reviewer). He gives brief but cogent characterizations of his narrators simply by naming them: Benji, or Benjamin, the idiot of the title, is the first-born of the family, like the Biblical Benjamin. Jason, like his classical counterpart of golden-fleece fame, favors wealth over love and is finally punished, with lovely irony, when his niece steals his strongbox full of money. (This is what I mean when I say that irony is a form of coherence with a sharp point: how else would you punish a miser?)

Such evocative namings give the reader an enormous amount of information in very brief form. The *locus classicus* for these is Melville's opening to *Moby-Dick*: "Call me Ishmael." We learn from these three words that the narrator is using a pseudonym and that he is a romantic character, an isolated character. The Biblical Ishmael is characterized thus: "his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him."<sup>21</sup> So we are also given the first of a large number of Old Testament allusions that are keyed in to the inexorable pace and the murky weightiness of Melville's story. Captain Ahab's name is just one of these. It is Ahab, a worshipper of false gods, of whom it is prophesied that, just as dogs licked up the blood of his victim, Naboth, so would they lick up his own blood.<sup>22</sup> In Chapter XVI of *Moby-Dick*, we learn that Ahab's name will somehow prove prophetic. Naturally, Melville's story, set on the high seas, comes up missing any blood-licking dogs at all just when they are needed for the prophecy, so he goes to some trouble to characterize sharks as "the dogs of the sea." And that is why, in the climactic scene, the sharks "seemed to follow that one boat without molesting the others."<sup>23</sup> If he doesn't make explicit the fulfillment of the prophecy, this is surely because a meticulous accounting for every detail, at that point in the story, would put the brakes to the juggernaut of his ending.

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The fashion of play-making I can properly compare to nothing so naturally as the alteration of apparel; for in the time of the great crop-doublet, your huge bombastic plays, quilted with mighty words

to lean purpose, was only then in fashion: and as the doublet fell, neater inventions began to set up. Now, in the time of spruceness, our plays follow the niceness of our garments, single plots, quaint conceits, lecherous jests, dressed up in hanging sleeves...

—Thomas Middleton<sup>24</sup>

When Lenz mentions “unity of customs,” he touches on a form of unity with the elasticity of a Superball. Custom may look like a sub-set of “true to life,” but often the two are distinctly at odds with one another, as in the convention that—provided it is the right kind of story—a character may suddenly, without transition, cease talking and belt out a song to illustrate a point. We accept this if it is done in a musical, deplore it if it is done in a board meeting. Literary convention is a large and variable category of coherence, which makes me think that, just as making a story coherent causes it to cling like Saran Wrap to the old and familiar—characters, theme, problem, etc.—it may be that the old and familiar in themselves trigger the coherence switch in our brains. Certainly convention often allows the story to go in directions that are neither logical nor true to life. You can test this hypothesis by seeing what strange and wonderful events can follow the words “Once upon a time.” Here we don’t apply the “real life” standard at all: No one watching Disney’s *Cinderella* ever complains that real mice are seldom transformed into horses, and real pumpkins almost never into carriages.

But the process can be taken a step further: if the available conventions do not give the story-teller enough latitude, he or she can simply define a new set for a particular story. In fiction, for example, we have traditionally segregated human beings from cartoon characters. Most of us never gave this any thought, but someone in the movie industry did and deliberately jumbled people and cartoon characters together in the movie *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* Having noticed the segregation, they treated it as willful and cruel: the Toons live in a cartoon ghetto, Toontown, and aren’t supposed to leave it. The writers created endless novelty out of the interactions between Toons and human beings. Thinking about the relationships may make you dizzy: the “real” human beings were playing fictional roles opposite characters who had been invented—by human beings.

I once asked an editor of a scholarly press how she went about deciding what manuscripts deserved serious attention. She said, “Oh, I just glance over them and select out the ones that look like the sort of thing we do.” It won’t do, after all, to publish the sort of thing she *doesn’t* do, for her readers have certain expectations when they pick up her journal. If you buy *Ladies’ Home Journal*, you don’t expect articles like those in *Popular Mechanics*. But there is a subtle balance here: editors demand that the writer be different while insisting that he or she not be all *that* different. Extreme differentness increases contrast, thereby generating vividness, at the expense of removing the story from the realm of the known. The writer, seeking to make an impression, constantly pokes around in the envelope of the known, but editors want him or her only to push it out a little bit, not to break right through and leave a great rip.



It does not matter on what principle the law is based,  
so it be a law.

—Robert Louis Stevenson<sup>25</sup>

As soon as we are shown the existence of something old  
in a new thing, we are pacified.

—Nietzsche<sup>26</sup>

A taxonomy of coherence in fiction might contain the  
following entries:

GENUS: Coherence

SPECIES:

1. Unity of time
2. Unity of place
3. Unity of action
4. Unity of problem
5. Unity of theme
6. Unity of characters
7. Unity of mood or style
8. Agreement with human fantasy

9. Agreement with “life”:
  - a. logic
  - b. natural law
  - c. custom
  - d. prejudice and common beliefs (however false)
10. Agreement with literary convention (here we must include parodies of conventions and deliberate *rejections* of the expected convention; again, it appears as if anything familiar to the reader supplies a dollop of coherence)
11. Agreement with assorted specifications posited by the author early in the story
12. Leitmotifs
13. Rhyme, meter, and alliteration (all sources of coherence—that is, ways of giving the reader something he or she has already encountered)

There are surely other forms of coherence, perhaps many, not mentioned here, and people interested in classification would probably find much to do in putting the species into order with relation to one another. But I am a collector, not an organizer, for which I offer my garage as evidence. It may be that some forms of coherence should be viewed as permanent lodgers in the house of fiction while others are more in the way of transient guests. The unities of time and place, #1 and #2, as we have seen, give way to #9—agreement with “life”—in long stories, and many writers are content to go through an entire career without tinkering with the literary tradition they write in (#10). Probably few authors would argue that #3, unity of action, is not generally a good idea, but even fewer would argue that it is present in all great literature. Annette von Droste-Hülshoff’s story, *Die Judenbuche* [*The Jew’s Beech Tree*], generally considered a jewel of nineteenth-century German literature, was criticized by Theodor Fontane for being really two stories.<sup>27</sup> If Fontane is right, and he seems to have a point, then unity of action, too, is just a good idea rather than the law.

It must be stressed that different types of coherence can come into conflict. Often novelists show us one form of coherence going for the jugular of another. Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* would on one level be more satisfying if it ended with Huckleberry Finn and Jim rafting off

into infinity at the end of the novel, instead of being given a leg up into a society that is, after all, of indifferent quality. You may feel that you want to tell Mark Twain: “A youngster on his own, with infinite resource—that is a romantic story, man! You can’t end it by handing out *money!*” But if you were able to say this to Twain, he would probably ask how sending a black slave and a boy south on the Mississippi could be seen as a satisfactory ending to his novel. Here, as happens often, two forms of coherence collide: the demands of fantasy and those of “real life.”<sup>C</sup> Also, literary convention, as a type of coherence, can create forms that eventually get crosswise with other types of coherence, such as “true to life,” and this may account in large part for periods of conscious “realism” in literature. Writers have a habit of pointing out that the past generation was untrue to real life. Naturally, it is never very long before their own literary conventions have grown tiresome and made them vulnerable to the same criticism. Most literary traditions see themselves as lovers of real life, but when was any lover so fickle? Making literature realistic is a bit like banning gambling: many people think it’s a grand idea in the abstract.

“Realism,” if it is taken to mean an attempt to present an unadorned version of “reality,” doesn’t stand up at all well to examination. It is like one of those very dim stars that you can see out of the corner of your eye but that disappear if you try to look directly at them. For one thing, if we look at fiction from the point of view of the public it is intended for, we must allow the “real” to include everything that that public *thinks* is real. This means that each generation’s political and social prejudices must be seen as part of the foundation of their “realism.”<sup>D</sup> These are shifting sands

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C. I don’t know who first made the suggestion that *Huckleberry Finn* should end thus, but I am convinced I saw a discussion of this many years ago somewhere in Wolfgang Kayser’s *Das sprachliche Kunstwerk*.

D. The “truest” ideas of each generation can be identified by the taboos placed on their denial. Such taboos appear designed to protect cultural tenets viewed as too important to fool with. Naturally, the more carefully we protect them, the less we examine them, so that they are usually not well substantiated, which may partly explain why they collapse so easily when their time is up. That is, there is an inverse relationship between how universal an idea is and how carefully it is scrutinized. This suggests that you should believe little that is commonly believed—especially about systems too complex to run experiments on—and should investigate everything that is universally known to be true. As Bertrand Russell pointed out, “The fact that an opinion has been widely held is —>



indeed. Homer surely thought of himself as a realist, as the author of the *Song of Roland* must have, and just as surely, each would question whether the other was “realistic.” It is only recent epochs that we ourselves term “realistic.” The further away literature is in space and time, the less “realistic” it is and the more “mythical.” Yet since people persistently criticize literature in terms of “real life,” it seems likely that most writers—in the past, if not in the present—at least thought they were being realistic.

Here we must stress that, however necessary coherence is, a story is not improved by being given every possible *form* of coherence: more is not necessarily better, just as an engine doesn’t run better if you put in twice as much oil as it needs. Indeed, because coherence generates the known and is therefore the enemy of vividness, it seems unlikely that a writer would use every possible form of coherence even if he or she could. A story written this way would surely have a close and stuffy atmosphere. While I don’t want to start trouble, I cannot read Thomas Mann without feeling that his persnickety obsession with coherence causes the lifeblood of his story to suffer some clotting.

I mentioned earlier that television interviews tend to show their subjects wandering around, simply to give the viewer something more dramatic to look at than a person’s head. Whenever I watch them I reflect on how stiff and awkward you feel when you’re told to walk casually down a corridor with a camera running. The directors seek to create coherence as well, often by holding the interview in a place that has some kind of relationship, however tenuous, with the subject. After I wrote a book about the folklore of death, different directors independently chose

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> no evidence whatever that it is not utterly absurd.” (*Marriage and Morals*, 58) And according to Paul Valéry, “That which has always been accepted by everyone, everywhere, is almost certain to be false.” (*Tel Quel*, 1943: Bartlett, 909b) And Shaw: “All great truths begin as blasphemies.” (*Annajanska*, 1919: Bartlett, 837b) But if you try to live by such precepts, it’s best to keep a low profile at public gatherings.

Having said this, I should admit that it surely isn’t possible to investigate cultural beliefs thoroughly or dispassionately. The entirety of culture is too complex to analyze, and none of the parts—and you yourself are a part—is independent of the whole. So what you really do when you write about a complex subject is to rip out pieces of the whole and create useful or gratifying mythologies about them. This is easier and more fun if you believe firmly in your results.

to interview me—in a graveyard! It's not as if cemeteries are cheap, convenient, or quiet—they are none of these. In Southern California, they stopped being cheap with the advent of movies (a local cemetery charges \$900 a day for movie-making, and a director told me that was a bargain), and they stopped being quiet when power lawnmowers and trenching machines were invented. Indeed: all those old poems are wrong: graveyards are unbelievably busy, noisy places, and interviews in them are stop-and-go because of this. Once I participated in a clandestine cemetery interview and the lot of us was discovered and run off and had to finish the interview in a city park already occupied by gangs of squalling infants and what appeared to be a lawnmower rally.

Most people are amused by the director's choice of a cemetery: it seems trite. But the alternative—leaving no connection at all between words and picture—creates a distressing lack of coherence. Television sound technicians have a saying that covers this: "Hear a dog, see a dog." In the O. J. Simpson trial and tribulation, a cameraman got in trouble by zooming in on O. J.'s hands when Marcia Clark was talking about those self-same hands. From the point of view of the judge, this was a violation of the attorney-client privilege, but the alternative is a static picture that is unrelated to the dialogue. So the cameraman was doing only what he had been trained to do: connecting picture and topic.

Great writers routinely violate the laws of coherence without consequences, while minor ones aren't allowed the same privilege. If you remove the genius from Goethe's *Faust*—by translating it, for example—it is the most dreadfully ungainly thing. Multitudes of characters appear and disappear, and God—in fiction always subordinate to the author—simply changes his mind at the end and announces that Faust will be saved anyway, even if Mephistopheles seems to have won the contest for Faust's soul. It is not just *a deus ex machina*, it is *the deus ex machina*. If you did this in a mystery, your literary reputation would be taken out on a dark night and shot and dumped in a shallow grave, and your memory would be scorned by mystery fans in *saecula saeculorum* and *ad aeternitatem*. It is probably superfluous to point this out, but great writers have liberties denied the rest of us because they also have talents denied the rest of us. Brilliant style can make up for stupid story.

Finally, let me admit that the view of coherence presented here is astonishingly unsatisfying and devoid of meaning. Our very sense of coherence demands that coherence in literature be something more sublime than a patchwork of largely arbitrary methods of satisfying our brains. And it seems to be a violation of coherence for there to be a whole lot of *forms* of coherence: “unity,” whatever else it is, should after all be one. But the evidence suggests strongly that the coherence center in our neural network, however grand its pretensions, is in fact satisfied by a remarkably diverse group of techniques. It tells us that we must build a splendid castle but then happily accepts a shanty with a bunch of rickety lean-tos patched onto it.



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3. Maugham, 637 (section 59).
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5. Sir Philip Sidney, 134.
6. Jean Chapelain, *Sommaire d'une poétique dramatique*, in Clark, 91.
7. François Ogier, preface to *Tyr et Sidon*, in Clark, 83.
8. Tirso de Molina (Gabriel Tellez), *Cigarrales de Toledo* [*The Orchards of Toledo*] (1624), in Clark, 68.
9. Jean Racine, preface to *Bérénice*, in Clark, 116. See also Pierre de Laudun d'Aigaliers, *L'Art poétique*, in Clark, 57.
10. Dryden, 52.
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15. Campbell, *The Improbable Machine*, 222.
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27. Fontane's observation was quoted on a 1979 German tape of *Die Judenbuche* in the series *Deutsche Literatur: Wir lesen vor*. Turgenev was also quoted as having similar complaints.

## Chapter Five

### *Le Mot injuste*

1. Only such words should be used as are understood by the average reader.
2. When it is necessary to use unfamiliar terms, they should be explained briefly.
3. Concrete, specific words and phrases are preferable to general, abstract ones, because they are clearer and more interesting.
4. Trite, hackneyed phrases, although readily understood, lack freshness and originality and should be avoided as far as possible.

—Willard Grosvenor Bleyer,  
*Newspaper Writing and Editing*<sup>1</sup>

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;  
All mimsy were the borogroves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.

—Lewis Carroll, *Jabberwocky*<sup>2</sup>

The sister arts enjoy the use of a plastic and ductile material, like the modeller's clay; literature alone is condemned to work in mosaic with finite and quite rigid words.

—Robert Louis Stevenson, *On Some  
Technical Elements of Style in Literature*<sup>3</sup>

If what I have argued in the first chapter is true—that our cognitive apparatus is so constructed that even the most vivid perception is dulled by time and exposure—then it will be seen that writers are put in an impossible position. For the building blocks of their craft—words—can be bright and shiny only if they are brand new, but if they are brand new they cannot have meaning to the reader. The writer is like a sculptor who has only clay to work with, and his patron has announced that he is bored

to tears with clay, can't stand the sight, smell, or feel of the stuff. If he is to succeed, our sculptor will either have to disguise his clay or renew it somehow, perhaps using it in a radically new way.

It's not as if writers aren't aware of this dilemma. Often they experiment with new vocabulary, but the more new vocabulary they use, the more they sacrifice meaning. At the risk of sending my spellchecker into convulsions, let me give an example from *Finnegan's Wake*, a novel that was published with an errata slip that looked as if it needed an errata slip: "Otherways wesways like that provost scoffing bedoueen the jebel and the jphysian sea."<sup>4</sup> As a rule, when writers use a lot of new vocabulary, they become very conservative with their syntax. We may not know what Lewis Carroll's toves are, but we're quite sure that the word "slithy" modifies them. Even Joyce is generally conservative with syntax, although in the sentence I've quoted, depending on the meaning of "bedoueen" (between?), there's more than one candidate for the verb. The vocabulary of *Finnegan's Wake* presents a daunting obstacle to the reader; reading it at a normal pace is like trying to do a sprightly tango while immersed in a sludge of tapioca. Few writers have followed Joyce in gaining newness at the cost of murkiness; the trade-off is too drastic. So writers typically accept their shop-worn vocabulary and look for ways to make it as contrastive as possible. (But writers often make up words where the meaning is self-evident or needn't be precise. I've found many words jeelooping through Paul Theroux's books that never met a dictionary.)

We shall make some progress if we acknowledge—and this is commonly accepted—that language is more vivid as it is more concrete. Journalists, for whom sustaining reader-interest is of the essence, have no doubts about this: "The newspaperman selects where possible the short, concrete word—the word which expresses the idea simply, directly, and clearly."<sup>5</sup> And what is true of words is true of facts: "All the time you should be trying to find out facts which will make the feature come alive, avoiding the general and looking for the particular."<sup>6</sup>

An advertising manual even proposes the following drill for the novice adman: "Repeat to yourself a thousand times: I will be specific. I will not use generalities."<sup>7</sup> Contrast is apparently most intense between the most specific words, least intense between the most general words:

neither pastels in painting nor abstractions in writing can create high contrast. The mot juste might be usefully defined as the word that has as its referent the smallest possible piece of the material world.

For a novice writer, it is helpful to practice reducing words to a more specific form:

animal: dwarf mongoose  
fish: Mozambique mouth-brooder  
house: Swisso-Jappo bungalow<sup>A</sup>  
man: geezer  
street: mews  
pie: blackberry tart  
gun: model 1896 Swedish Mauser  
pastry: Napoleon  
tree: pin oak  
dog: blue merle Australian shepherd  
plant: bladderwort

We have moved to a set of words that, by excluding almost all the material world, either create very specific images or (as with the mouth-brooder and the bungalow) at least have the virtue of rarity and therefore vividness. It's not at all clear what an "animal" looks like, so it is difficult to create a contrastive image with the word *animal*, but a mongoose looks only like a mongoose; it doesn't look like a caribou or a springtail or a black-crowned night heron.

Here the reader may offer two objections:

1) Some of our replacement-terms are surely unfamiliar to most people.

2) They take up far more space than the generic words they replace.

Neither objection will stand up to scrutiny, even if they are standard-issue arguments in discussions of diction. (The first is contained in the list of recommendations at the head of this chapter.) Writers in fact routinely use unfamiliar terms that they have no intention of defining for the reader, as Ian Fleming does in this passage from *Thunderball*: "...a waste of low-

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A. A droll term used in the early part of the 20th century for a particular California bungalow with heavy chord beams, like those of a Swiss chalet, that turn up at the ends like those of a pagoda. Source: historian of architecture Robert Winter.

lying scrub, casuarinas, mastic, and poison-wood...”<sup>8</sup> What they lose in clarity they gain in accuracy and—more importantly—vividness.

The second objection—that we’ve used more words—is highly misleading. English teachers and copy-editors often treat word-parsimony as a virtue, as though it were the rhetorical equivalent of putting aside savings for your old age. On an Internet site, an author “improves” the following passage by removing words: “Bill stepped out to look at the new car Joe had just pulled up in. It was shining, its metallic blue paint sparkling and glinting in the hot afternoon sun like a freshly cut diamond.” The new version: “Bill stepped outside to see Joe’s car pull up at the kerb. Its paint sparkled in the afternoon sun.” The author then says, “We’ve gone from 35 to 19 words. Almost half!”

We don’t like to brag, but we can do much better than this: “Bill saw Joe’s new car.” Five words! Down to one-seventh! And our sentence is now so—umm, compact?

When everyone knows something, no one needs to examine it. The word-parsimony theory seems so plausible that people come up with bizarre and irrational expressions of it. I culled this one from a fine book on journalism: “Never use two words when one will serve better.”<sup>9</sup> This is surely true, but its reverse is equally true: “Never use one word when two words will serve better.” It is a kind of palindrome-truth, capable of being read in opposite directions. In fact, it’s easy to give excellent advice as long as you stay within this formula: never fling a fresh mangosteen at the neighbor’s tabby cat when a rotting pumpkin will have more impact.

The real issue is not how many words you use but how much meaning and impact you can stuff into them. The specific word may be twice as long as the generic, but if it contains ten times as much information, while being endlessly more vivid for its uncommonness, then it represents a net gain. Choosing the common, abstract word over the uncommon, specific one is like taking paper dollars when you could have had silver ones: the silver dollar is undeniably heavier than the paper, but it’s also worth far more.

Most of our language does not get very specific: we say, “I’ll go get my car,” rather than, “I’ll go get my 2009 Honda Civic.” Eleanor Rosch, among others, refers to this level of generalization—“car” or “house” rather than “Honda” or “bungalow”—as “basic level.”<sup>10</sup> But because we



usually use words at this level of generalization, the “basic level” words end up being used far more often than the more specific words. And that means that specific words are less familiar to us than the generic, hence more vivid. Writers avoid words from basic level, then, both because they are too abstract to create an image in the reader’s head and because they are used too often to grab his attention and wrestle it to the ground. Try to imagine what a generic fish looks like. Does it look like a pelagic wayfarer such as the bluefin tuna, or a bottom-feeder such as the flathead catfish, or even a pot-bellied seahorse? All these are “fish,” which is why the word “fish” can’t convey much information to the reader.

So competent writers go past basic level to the most specific terms possible, as in this passage from Cormac McCarthy’s superb novel *Blood Meridian*:

They disembark aboard a lighter, settlers with their chattels, all studying the low coastline, the thin bight of sand and scrub pine swimming in the haze.<sup>11</sup>

McCarthy could have said “boat” instead of “lighter”—the generic instead of the specific—but too much of that washes all the color out of prose, as we find if we rewrite his passage in more generic words:

They get off onto a boat, people with their possessions, all looking at the shore, where the haze obscures the sand and trees.

Writers who have mastered this process, as has Kurt Vonnegut, sometimes throw in hyper-specific modifiers where they might seem to be irrelevant, as when Vonnegut describes a “sound like a ball-peen hammer breaking a milk bottle.”<sup>12</sup> It is not likely that a ball-peen hammer breaking a milk bottle sounds different from, say, a shipwright’s clench hammer breaking a bottle of Perrier on the deck of that lighter McCarthy told us about—and if it did, the reader would surely not know the difference. So it might seem as if the generic terms “hammer” and “bottle” would do as well. But the specific terms create a more visual, concrete image than the generic terms.

For meaning, the generic will do; for vividness, the specific is essential. If this were not so, Vonnegut might have said, “a sound like a piece of metal breaking a piece of glass,” or even, “a sound like glass shattering.”

Book reviewers do not always understand this process and its rationale. Rosch (and after her Jeremy Campbell)<sup>13</sup> quotes a review from *Ms.* that satirizes the author's supposed obsession with brand names:

And so, after putting away my 10-year-old Royal 470 manual and lining up my Mongol number 3 pencils on my Goldsmith Brothers Formica imitation-wood desk, I slide into my oversize squirrel-skin L.L. Bean slippers and shuffle off to the kitchen. There, holding *Decades* in my trembling right hand, I drop it, *plunk*, into my new Sears 20-gallon, celadon-green Permanex trash can.<sup>14</sup>

No one would argue that this level of specificity, in this passage, is not obtrusive, but this is so only because the detail is irrelevant. I got a copy of the novel in question and could not for the life of me find a passage in it that resembled the above satire. The author had in fact chosen specific words whenever possible, but all competent writers do that, and not out of a fascination with brand names.

It is true that such specificity may look like snobbery, at least when it shows expensive brand names. Consider the following passage from Ian Fleming's *Thunderball*:

On board the yacht, No. 1 put down his night glasses, took a Charvet handkerchief out of the breast pocket of his white sharkskin jacket and dabbed gently at his forehead and temples. The musky scent of Schiaparelli's Snuff was reassuring...<sup>15</sup>

But the character is wealthy: why would he not have expensive things? And if we take such a description for snobbery, what are we to make of S. J. Perelman's equally detailed description of "a perfectly prosaic wax mannequin wearing a powder-blue ski jacket, canary-colored slacks, and synthetic elkskin loafers."<sup>16</sup> Surely the mannequin is not putting on airs, and neither is Perelman. The issue is really specificity, not a fascination with brand names. And it is not just a matter of evoking a mental picture: do elkskin loafers look significantly different from any other loafer? I doubt it, but they do allow something exotic—a piece of elk—to get into a sentence about a mannequin in a department store.

The reason the specific word is charged with meaning is that what linguists call "semantic marking" becomes more extensive as a word becomes more specific. As you go from *animal* to *horse* to *mare* to *filly*, each word retains the semantic markings of the larger classes and adds to

them, so that with *filly* you have a term for an animal that is a horse and female (like the mare) but adds the quality of youth as well. With each stage, more of the material world is excluded, so more information is conveyed. What this means is that if you want to create an explosion of information, you have to use the most specific words possible. And you get a bonus: *filly* is far less common than the generic term *horse*, which makes it more vivid.

An acquaintance of mine, Sharon Sheffield, who did the word-replacement exercise at my suggestion, demonstrated the power of specificity by changing the word *table* into *Chippendale escritoire*. Here we've gone from five letters to twenty-one—a net loss, from the point of view of the word-hoarders, of sixteen letters. But our gain in information is simply astounding. It's like trading a leaflet for a library. Even if we leave out its secondary meanings (the multiplication table, for example), *table* still gives us an extremely uncertain body of information: a table is an object of variable size with a variable kind of pediment, made out of any of a wide variety of materials, from wood to chrome to Formica. You, the reader, could of course visualize a table, but what are the odds it would be like the one that I, the writer, am visualizing? Quick: does it have four legs or just one? The gears of communication slip a cog or two if I have to rely on the reader to guess at my meaning.

Now compare the information contained in *Chippendale escritoire*:

- a. It's an expensive antique.
- b. It's a writing desk, not a kitchen table, located in a study, not a kitchen.
- c. It's of British origin.
- d. It's not made of Formica, particle board, or chrome.
- e. It's somewhere in the upper stratosphere of the class system, hinting at personal secretaries and country houses.
- f. Its style is rococo, so it is not severe and functional in its form. In fact, it may have so many sharp ornaments that it looks armed and dangerous.

Finally, the expression is endlessly more vivid than *table*, since the words are used so seldom. For many months I kept an eye out for either term in my reading and finally found *escritoire* in Chapter 13 of P. G.

Wodehouse's *Spring Fever*, where he could have used *desk* but knew better.

Few readers would pick up on all the information in a specialized term such as this: in an explosion of information, there's bound to be an occasional dud. But here again, as in the example from Cormac McCarthy, the specific term becomes more vivid the less it is known, so that ignorance equals vividness, if not bliss.



Next, when you are describing  
A shape, or sound, or tint,  
Don't state the matter plainly,  
But put it in a hint;  
And learn to look at all things  
With a sort of mental squint.

—Lewis Carroll, “Poeta Fit, Non Nascitur” (1869)<sup>17</sup>

Words are an albatross to a writer—heavy, hopeless, fateful things. One writes to make words mean something new.

—Joy Williams<sup>18</sup>

La dernière chose qu'on trouve en faisant un ouvrage, est de savoir celle qu'il faut mettre la première.

The last thing one settles in writing a book is what one should put in first.

—Pascal, *Pensées*<sup>19</sup>

Someday somebody should compile an encyclopedia of obvious truths, because then we would know exactly where to look up misconceptions and falsehoods. When a fact is obvious, most of us simply don't examine it, and we don't much like the people who do. You wonder if Galileo thought people would be amazed and delighted at the idea that the sun doesn't go around the earth. The language still hasn't accommodated itself to Galileo, although it's just as well Hemingway called his novel *The Sun Also Rises*, instead of *The Earth Also Revolves*.

Here is a prime specimen of obvious truth that has been quoted many times, perhaps because it states a view that, in the shifty and treacherous world of diction, gives us something solid and authentic to believe in:

Whatever one wishes to say, there is one noun only by which to express it, one verb only to give it life, one adjective only which will describe it. One must search until one has discovered them, this noun, this verb, this adjective, and never rest content with approximations, never resort to trickery, however happy, or to vulgarisms, in order to dodge the difficulty.<sup>20</sup>

This passage first seemed sensible enough to me, and then it began to trouble me vaguely. For a while I thought it was my old difficulty with received wisdom: gospels have always produced doubt in me, not belief. But then I found, to my dismay, that I not only didn't believe de Maupassant's assertion, I finally couldn't even make any sense of it. Take the statement that "Whatever one wishes to say, there is one noun only by which to express it, one verb only to give it life, one adjective only which will describe it." Bleyer calls this "a classic bit of advice that every writer should heed,"<sup>21</sup> yet I can't think of any way that it can be taken for a true or even a helpful statement. It is obviously untrue if applied to a group of writers, for anything they expressed they would express idiosyncratically. Twain and Thoreau, forced to express the same thought, would create as much difference as similarity. We rescue ourselves from this difficulty by supposing—and I guess this must be true—that de Maupassant meant the statement to refer to the efforts of a single writer. For that writer, writing on his particular subject, there is only one noun, only one verb, etc.

The trouble is, that's not true either, unless it's read as a tautology, in which case it's silly. De Maupassant's view makes the seemingly reasonable assumption that the whole point of writing is to match up meaning with words, the way you match up dominoes by the number of white dots. This leads to a static model of writing, a kind of Steady State Theory of diction. Unfortunately, many English teachers hustle this same model, especially when they tell you how to organize an essay. I think of it as the Architectural Metaphor for writing: you do an outline and then follow it, the way a builder follows the architect's design. This would be all very well if your material would only stay put. But in writing, everything changes as you work. It is as if a contractor began to pour a

foundation only to see it turn into a utility closet. Organizing an essay is like trying to draw a portrait of Proteus while he changes shape.

Every choice you make creates an endless ripple of alterations in your prose—as everyone knows who has changed a few words in an essay and then had to change a few more to get the first ones to fit in, and a few more, etc. Naturally, these ripples, like those in a pond, eventually bounce off the far shore of the essay and return, so that you find yourself changing words at the beginning because you changed words in the middle. So the appropriate word one moment might be inappropriate the next. As Pascal says, the last thing one settles in writing a book may be what to put in first.

If the Steady State Theory were correct, writing should be like putting together a jig-saw puzzle, whereas it's much more like growing some seeds that aren't labeled properly but that you suspect may yield a tomato plant. Something grows, anyway, and you tend it as well as you can. It wilts, you water; it turns yellow, you fertilize. And finally the result may be a shape rather like what you expected, but never exactly so. Everyone I know who writes books tells me that my own experience is typical: you can't completely organize a book before writing it, unless you bring a halt to your thinking after doing the organizing. But since you can't write without thinking, this is literally inconceivable. David Brin, the science-fiction writer, says that he deals with this problem by writing only the first fifth of a novel before rewriting. Then he writes the second fifth, re-writes the whole thing, and so on to the end.<sup>22</sup> And John Sutherland, the British author, says that he has to write a book to organize it, and then he re-writes until he has it the way he wants it.<sup>23</sup>

The problem with de Maupassant's argument is that it misleads us as to what most writers, most of the time, are trying to do. Writers, especially writers of fiction, devote much of their energy to trying not to bore their readers: they seek impact at least as much as meaning. The difficulty is that they are obliged to use words, which are known, hence dull. It is like giving a chef a walloping big sack of rye flour and telling him to make appetizers, main course, salad, and desert out of it.<sup>B</sup>

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B. Viewers of the cooking show *Iron Chef* will note that this is rather like the challenge given to the competing chefs on that show: the theme ingredient has to be present in each course. Great chefs, it turns out, can make a passable ice cream even with turnips or trout. Fortunately for the judges, other ingredients are allowed with the theme ingredient.



One should always aim at being interesting, rather than exact.  
—Voltaire<sup>24</sup>

Prefer the familiar word to the far-fetched. Prefer the concrete to the abstract. Prefer the single word to the circumlocution. Prefer the short word to the long.  
—H. W. Fowler.<sup>25</sup>

Write with verbs and nouns. The adverb signifies the failure to find the right verb; the adjective, failure to find the right noun.  
—Attributed to Donald Murray<sup>26</sup>

Writers have to create the new—and newness equals vividness—either by saying something unheard of or by finding a new way of saying it. The first choice tends to lead away from the domain of the understandable, so the better writers reason that, if you can't use new words, then you can at least use new *categories* of words, as when you create an image. You do a shotgun marriage of words that had never even been introduced before. Only seldom can you get away with coining a new word, but you can almost always create a sentence that has never been seen before. With imagery, endless newness can be created, and it generally creates ripples of its own because you not only can't mix your metaphors—our organ of coherence would be offended—but it is profitable to pull them all out of the same tub. Melville chooses metaphors from the sea, not from farming, throughout *Moby Dick*.

But it is not only language that is—alas!—a body of known, hence dull, information. Much of the writer's material is as well, because much of what we write merely directs the reader's attention to something already known. If you characterize someone in a novel, you do so in terms already familiar to the reader. It won't do, after all, to explain the unknown in terms of the unknown.

But that means that you're not even giving the reader new information. What to do? You use expressions that are actually chosen for being unexpected. The received wisdom is that writers look for the

exactly right word. But the exactly right word can never be vivid if it is used “properly”—the exact word, after all, is also the expected word. To be vivid, a word has to be slightly out of place, slightly skewed. When Haecker remarks that “The unnatural style of many writers is the product of a secret fear of appearing banal,”<sup>27</sup> he is talking about a fear that is by no means unfounded and a solution that is commonplace. When P. G. Wodehouse has a character make an assignation at “one ack emma” instead of “one A.M.,” it is because “ack emma” (from an RAF alphabet for increasing phonetic redundancy) is not only mildly inappropriate but wholly unexpected. It has the additional advantage that it brings rhetoric associated with world-altering events into a story about a scheme to recover a bust from a country house.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, writers actually spend much of their time searching for words that can be construed as appropriate but would not normally be used in the way they intend to use them. The clearest examples of this are usually humorous, as in the opening of Wodehouse’s *Spring Fever*:

Spring had come to New York, the eight-fifteen train from Great Neck had come to the Pennsylvania terminus, and G. Ellery Cobbold, that stout economic royalist, had come to his downtown office, all set to prise another wad of currency out of the common people.

If we put ourselves into a severe and pedestrian mood, while freeing ourselves from all fancy, we can accuse Wodehouse of various errors here. Faulty parallelism for one: *come* is used metaphorically, then literally in parallel statements. And *prise* is inappropriate because G. Ellery Cobbold will surely not encounter the common people at all in the course of his day, and if he did, he would not lever anything out of them. Finally, Cobbold is in a country altogether lacking in royalty—how can we call him a royalist? Surely Wodehouse calls him an economic royalist to avoid calling him a capitalist—the common and expected term. To go back to our earlier example, we note that *filly* would become even more vivid if we used it metaphorically, as by making it refer to a young woman. (More than one author of westerns thought of this before us.)

There are whole categories of rhetoric that fight tooth and nail with the notion of the exact word. Irony, for example, allows the writer to choose from a whole set of words that are actually opposite from the seemingly appropriate word. Irony is always contrastive because the



expressed and the implied attitudes are at each other's throats. You could of course argue that perhaps the ironic term *is* the exactly right term. But if you expand the notion of the exact word to include opposites, endlessly variable images, and words whose meaning is around and about and gallywampus and retrograde with respect to the referent intended by the writer, then the term loses all meaning. One suspects, in any case, that it is all these possibilities that de Maupassant refers to with the term "clowneries," translated here as "vulgarisms." If not, I can't think what he is referring to. The point is that contrast—the source of vividness—is incompatible with the familiar. In fact, all vividness turns ill, languishes, and dies when exposed to our senses for any length of time. That is why jokes are always funniest the first time you hear them. They cannot be funny if they do not startle—but stop me if you've heard this one before.

And now let's go back and sort out the quotation from H. W. Fowler that heads this section: "Prefer the familiar word to the far-fetched. Prefer the concrete to the abstract. Prefer the single word to the circumlocution. Prefer the short word to the long." The second sentence here is largely true, but there are obvious exceptions, as when a writer mines a pompous style for humor. As for the rest of Fowler's advice, it has little basis in reality. In fact, competent writers avoid the familiar, sacrifice brevity to vividness, and choose words according to far more complex rules than Fowler's demand that they be short. It's probably just as well that Fowler never worked as copy editor on Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* or any of Sir Thomas Browne's books.

Ideally, writer's rules would derive from the practice of competent writers. But this is often not the case. Rules are often created by English teachers who don't actually have to write well enough to hold the attention of readers, or by writers who don't take the trouble of testing the rule against actual practice. Recently a friend sent me a nice example from the Internet:

"Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs. The adjective hasn't been built that can pull a weak or inaccurate noun out of a tight place." William Strunk and E.B. White wrote [this] in their venerated *Elements of Style*.

Adjectives and adverbs are the black sheep of the Parts of Speech family, but there's a kernel of truth in the above quotation. Use of too

many adverbs may be a sign of lazy writing. If you show, not tell, you don't need adverbs.

The writer then gives examples to prove the point:

“She ran out angrily.”

“She slammed the door and stomped out.”

The first sentence is “bad,” the second “good.” But all this example does is demonstrate, as Nicolas Taleb points out, that carefully chosen or constructed examples don't constitute proof. At most these examples prove that their author isn't especially adept. The author has used each word strictly within its usual meaning and done nothing to create any vividness at all. It makes more sense to introduce something notoriously violent into the sentence, even if only by means of an image:

She left, and a bitter tornado with a hangover couldn't have slammed the door harder.

Here you could leave out the adjective “bitter,” but it amused me to leave the reader wondering why a tornado would be bitter. After all, it pretty much always gets its own way. Still, let us examine the problem from another point of view.

Taleb named his book *The Black Swan* because it is about how any number of examples showing the workings of a rule can't “prove” the rule, and a single exception can disprove it. Millions of white swans don't prove that “all swans are white.” When Europeans got to Australia, in fact, they discovered that there are black swans. Similarly, we can cast doubt on the “avoid adjectives and adverbs” rule by locating passages in which the rule becomes totally nonsensical. My favorite is from E. F. Benson's *Mapp and Lucia*:

Irene rose to more daring conceptions yet. One night she had dined on a pot of strawberry jam and half a pint of very potent cocktails, because she wanted her eye for color to be at its keenest round about eleven o'clock when the moon would rise over the marsh, and she hoped to put the lid forever on Whistler's naïve, old-fashioned attempts to paint moonlight. After this salubrious meal, she had come round to Mallards, waiting for the moon to rise, and sat for half an hour at Lucia's piano, striking random chords and asking Lucia what color they were. These musical rainbows suggested a wonderful idea, and she shut down the piano with a splendid purple bang.<sup>29</sup>

In the last sentence alone, it is hard to see how you can get rid of *any* of the three modifiers. “Musical” tells the reader that “rainbows” is an image, not to be taken literally, and if you delete “wonderful,” the reader has no idea why Irene reacts strongly. If you delete “purple,” of course, you lose the joke on which the entire passage depends.

But let’s look at it from another point of view: what do good writers typically do? We can count the adjectives and adverbs in the first paragraphs of some arguably competent writings to see if anyone is making a serious attempt to ban adjective and adverbs. In order to avoid arguments, I got a professor of linguistics and a professor of French to do the counting:

Dickens, *Hard Times*: 183 words; 2 adverbs and 25 adjectives. The modifiers equal 15% of the word-count.

Mark Twain, *Roughing It*: 340 words; 17 adverbs and 24 adjectives. 12% of the word-count.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise*: 146 words; 4 adverbs and 16 adjectives. 14% of the word-count.

Melville, *Moby-Dick*: 199 words; 9 adverbs and 13 adjectives. 11% of the word-count.

de Maupassant, *La Vie errante*: 204 words; 20 adverbs and 15 adjectives. 17.5% of the word-count.

The percentages of modifiers in these randomly chosen passages are fairly constant, ranging from eleven percent to seventeen and a half. It would appear, then, that our selection of writers antedated the rage against modifiers.



A good style in literature, if closely examined, will be seen to consist in a constant succession of tiny surprises."

—Attributed to Ford Maddox Ford<sup>30</sup>

So the reader’s sensory apparatus demands the new, while language is a sticking-plaster that attaches us firmly to the old. We cope by making the old new, and much of rhetoric is merely a set of tricks to do this. Zeugma—what Wodehouse was doing with the verb *come*—is either a grammatical error if you’re being serious or a fine drollery if you’re not.

When you think about it, there isn't a lot you can do to spice up a verb as common as *come* except to misuse it. When they're not using the exactly right word, then, writers make sure they're using a carefully skewed one—one that will surprise the reader while getting across the right message.



## References:

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4. Joyce, 5.
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14. *Ms.*, March, 1975, 47-8.
15. Fleming, 75.
16. Perelman, "Hell in the Gabardines," 169.
17. Carroll, 881.
18. Williams, quoted in Winokur, 107.
19. Pascal, 1101 (#63).
20. De Maupassant, Preface to *Pierre et Jean*, quoted in Allen, 229.
21. Bleyer, "Journalism," 33.
22. Brin, personal communication.
23. Sutherland, personal communication.
24. Voltaire, quoted in Hobbs, 235.
25. Fowler, quoted in Hobbs, 157.
26. I found this quotation on the Internet and assumed that the Donald Murray in question was the one who wrote a book on writing. On locating his book, however, I discovered that he uses modifiers the way other writers do.
27. Haecker, in Kempowski, 147. "Der unnatürliche Stil mancher Schriftsteller ist das Produkt einer geheimen Angst, banal zu wirken."
28. Wodehouse, *Uncle Dynamite*, 235.
29. Benson, *Mapp and Lucia*, 558.
30. [http://www.esc.edu/esconline/across\\_esc/writerscomplex.nsf/0/336aa1a4426e652a852569c3006c815d?OpenDocument](http://www.esc.edu/esconline/across_esc/writerscomplex.nsf/0/336aa1a4426e652a852569c3006c815d?OpenDocument)

## Chapter Six

### Strange Bedfellows

A mighty fortress is our God,  
A bulwark never failing.

—Luther: “Ein’ feste Burg ist unser Gott”

By choosing words from a more specific, less exhausted category than most of us do when we speak, writers are merely choosing the best of a bad lot. What our sensory apparatus demands, if the words are to be vivid, is that they be new, or, *faute de mieux*, at least seldom used. It is not only pretension that causes writers to use foreign words.

The classic solution to this problem is to use the old words in new ways: if you can’t change the words, you can at least change their environment. And this is what imagery does. The writer, choosing an image, is like someone who owns a tiresome orange jumpsuit and a boring pink sweater and wears them together just for the dramatic effect. Watch:

The emphasis was helped by the speaker’s hair, which bristled on the skirts of his bald head, a plantation of firs to keep the wind from its shining surface, all covered with knobs, like the crust of a plum pie, as if the head had scarcely warehouse-room for the hard facts stored inside.<sup>1</sup>

Here is imagery run amuck. A purist would fault Dickens for letting his images wander all over creation, so that his character’s skull is first a tree-lot, then the crust of a plum pie, then the outside of a storage depot. We apply the standard of coherence to imagery as to everything else.<sup>A</sup> But what Dickens loses in coherence, he gains in truly astonishing vividness. And he has done this without even using any unusual words, let alone new ones, and without succumbing to the temptation to cause his character to

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A. But note that Dickens has by no means lost sight of coherence here. He doesn’t just go over suddenly to a description of his character: he treats the description as an illustration of his subject, namely the emphatic manner of the speaker.

be inhumanly bizarre just to create newness. He has simply put things together that normally shun each other's company—skin and pie crusts, for example—while always going for the most specific term: “firs” rather than “trees,” “plum pie” rather than just “pie.” We may feel that this passage is a bit crazed, but few writers could write anything this vivid. And readers, if not critics, tolerate vivid incoherence far better than coherent dullness. The inappropriate is more vivid than the appropriate. If a roughneck in a bar swears and orders a beer, no one looks up; but if he blesses himself and orders glasses of buttermilk all around, then we take notice. Imagery, like politics, makes strange bedfellows.

Imagery really does two things for the writer. Besides putting old words into new environments, it also reduces the abstract to the particular—that is, returns to that group of words that are used less and are most vivid. Consider Luther's hymn “Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott” (“A mighty fortress is our God”). To grasp why Luther chose a metaphor here, we need only delete it: then we get something like “God is a powerful and protective force,” which says the same thing but is painfully vague and abstract. For the sake of specificity, hymn-writers routinely turn the deity into an object—bad theology, maybe, but good rhetoric. Indeed, driven by the exigencies of rhetoric, authors of hymns and psalms often demote God from his position as Ruler of the Universe to a hum-drum day job: “The Lord is my shepherd.”<sup>B</sup> In a Prussian hymnal from the end of the nineteenth century, I found a hymn that started, “König, dem kein König gleicht...” (“King, whom no king resembles”).<sup>2</sup> Here the author appears to have noticed (a) that he needed an image and (b) that he had committed the sacrilege of comparing God to one of his creations, even if his personal favorite. This may be what has led hymn writers in the West to give life to an ancient Persian expression and refer to God as “King of Kings”<sup>3</sup>—a term, incidentally, that was the opening wedge in the decipherment of cuneiform. God has suffered other indignities at the hands of authors: the need to get rid of a syllable to fit the scansion caused one Mennonite hymn to lower His status even further, from king (*König*) to prince (*Fürst*).<sup>4</sup>

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B. I found one hymn in which Jesus wasn't even the shepherd but merely a lamb (*Gesangbuch*, 115).

Few writers have understood imagery as well as Nathanael West. From *The Day of the Locust*: “Yet, despite his appearance, he was really a very complicated young man with a whole set of personalities, one inside the other like a nest of Chinese boxes.”<sup>5</sup> West sneaks up on us with this image: from “very complicated” to “whole set of personalities” to “a nest of Chinese boxes.” He has moved from the abstract to the concrete and, in the process, put together phenomena that normally don’t occur together in language: personalities and Chinese boxes.

From *Miss Lonelyhearts*:

But now let us consider the holes in our own bodies and into what these congenital wounds open. Under the skin of man is a wondrous jungle where veins like lush tropical growths hang along over-ripe organs and weed-like entrails writhe in squirming tangles of red and yellow. In this jungle, flitting from rock-gray lungs to golden intestines, from liver to lights and back to liver again, lives a bird called the soul. The Catholic hunts this bird with bread and wine, the Hebrew with a golden ruler, the Protestant on leaden feet with leaden words, the Buddhist with gestures, the Negro with blood.<sup>6</sup>

The notion that the soul takes the form of a bird is ancient and widespread, but only West takes it literally and imagines the soul-bird flitting about inside our guts. To accommodate the bird, thereby keeping his image coherent, he portrays the entrails as a jungle, an appropriate environment. And then he imagines religion as a kind of snipe-hunt, with each religion choosing a different weapon. The result is a passage loaded with newness even if the words and ideas are themselves old.

West also shows how diction can be rendered vivid by slightly *incorrect* usage. Technically, *lights* refers to animal lungs intended as food (lungs are light in weight, since they consist largely of air pockets). But West has already used *lungs* once, and *lights*, a more specific term with coarser implications, is far more evocative. It is like referring to your pancreas as sweetbreads. Since he doesn’t do anything further with the implication that our lungs are potential food and we are animals, one could argue that he has used an inappropriate word. But he has made this sacrifice in return for a great deal of vividness. *Lights* jumps out at the reader; *lungs* doesn’t.



Images are analogies—new relations that cohere to the topic by being somehow parallel to it in form, but that can be as contrastively new as the author’s interpretation of “somehow” can make them. Dickens compares hair to a plantation of firs and a head to a warehouse for storing facts. Analogical thinking is, in fact, what the brain in that warehouse does best, since the grammar of language itself works on the basis of analogy. We fault children for saying “two foots,” but we understand instantly what they mean, since making the same analogy ourselves is, well, child’s play:

*One book is to two books as*

*One foot is to two foots.*

Since the message still gets through, a “wrong” analogy is just about as good as a “right” analogy, and we’ve become very good at these processes through hundreds of millennia of practicing analogical reasoning while developing a brain suitable for language to colonize.

Not so with logic: bad logic is *not* equivalent to good, and, as a species, we have not honed our brain terribly well for logic. Imagine that you are visiting the zoo, and a friend remarks that lions sleep after they eat and don’t attack when they aren’t hungry, so he can safely go into the lions’ cage when the lions are napping. Don’t go with him. Use the language part of your brain to point out delicately that lions also sometimes go to sleep hungry.

Enter, then, an army of *like*’s and *as*’s—”My love is like a red red rose,” “She burnt with love, as straw with fire flameth”—and whole legions of metaphors with the comparative word left out.



Yesterday’s daring metaphors are today’s clichés.  
—Arthur Koestler<sup>7</sup>

Literature thrives on taboos, just as all art thrives  
on technical difficulties.  
—Anthony Burgess<sup>8</sup>

Successful images have a way of overstaying their welcome. We see used-up images everywhere in our everyday language—images that, once bright and clever, are no longer even seen as images. We use “mushroom” as a verb, no longer even thinking of it as an image for something that grows quickly, the way a mushroom pops up in your lawn overnight. Too many people have been “crooked as a dog’s hind leg” for that image to have much force any more. But it must be remembered that especially apt images are renewed each time they are encountered by someone unfamiliar with them, in the way that, as Samuel Butler pointed out, “The oldest books are still only just out to those who have not read them.”<sup>9</sup> So when they are clever enough, or are used seldom enough, images may last for centuries, as has the expression “cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey.” Throughout its history, the term *monkey* has been commonly used to refer to something that holds something else (as a “monkey wrench” does), and the “brass monkey” of the cited expression was a cannonball holder on a warship. People have interpreted the image by supposing that in frigid weather the balls would slip off the monkey because ice formed on them.<sup>C</sup> Such an interpretation makes little sense and is in any case unnecessary, for if the expression hadn’t been ambiguous when it came into being, it would certainly not have survived. Surely the point of the expression has always been that you can use it freely and, if rebuked, proffer the traditional explanation and imply that your critic has a dirty mind. So the image has been handed down faithfully through time, with each new generation briefly engaged by its cleverness, much the way boys happily pass on to each other such expressions as “colder’n the shady side of a witch’s tit,” or “colder’n a well-digger’s asshole.” (Recently I heard someone squeeze yet more use out of these expressions by deliberately putting them together: “colder’n the shady side of a well-digger.”) Such expressions don’t die out from age, because they are nurtured by people for whom they are not yet old.

And here we must note a painful truth: the more taboos we place on language, the more vivid are the things we can do with it, because it’s easy to create violent contrasts with words and ideas that aren’t supposed to be

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C. In a store in Solvang, California, I saw a placard giving this analysis of the joke.

expressed at all. I was in a saddlery some years ago, talking to a friend, and noticed an object that looked like a solid-leather bra. I asked about it. My friend grinned. "They're called 'squaw tits,'" he said, nicely combining the racist and the sexist in a single expression. I still don't know what the object was, for I remembered the imagery and forgot the definition.

We can expect, then, that politically correct thought will always be mirrored by politically incorrect jokes, which track correctness with perfect accuracy. Hazlitt said, "As we laugh from a spontaneous impulse, we laugh the more at any restraint upon this impulse. We laugh at a thing merely because we ought not."<sup>10</sup>

I mentioned that one can see the value of images by removing them. "It's really cold, isn't it?" doesn't have the force of the traditional rude simile involving witches or well-diggers and their body parts. And see what happens if we remove the images from the following passage in Dickens's *Hard Times*: "The speaker, and the schoolmaster, and the third grown person present, all backed a little, and swept with their eyes the inclined plane of little vessels then and there arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim."<sup>11</sup>

We can reduce this to: "The grownups all backed a little and watched the children, arranged in order, ready to be educated."

Our summary is efficient enough in some ways. We've used fewer words than Dickens; we've consolidated the grownups in the schoolroom (admittedly at the expense of the mystery as to who the third grownup is), and in some sense we've communicated to the reader the substance of the passage. But we have done this at a terrible cost. In fiction, where readers go on reading only if constantly engaged, the writer's efficiency is measured not by how few words he or she uses but by how vivid the language is. In the criminal law of literary practice it is at most a misdemeanor to use too many words; but if you bore the reader, your literary career will be hanged by the neck until it is dead.

Oddly, images become useful again once they are completely worn out and no longer even thought of as images. This is because then the writer can use them literally, startling us with the realization that they are images. Many of Gary Larson's *Far Side* cartoons were built on literal

interpretations of worn-out images, as when he showed a crocodile in the dock saying, “Well, of *course* I did it in cold blood, you idiot! I’m a reptile.”

Competent writers will be seen to resort to imagery most heavily when they are writing about the least interesting things. If the writer is conveying a character across a kitchen floor, he or she is unlikely to describe the pots and pans the character passes by; the reader is certainly familiar with pots and pans. Instead the writer may introduce an exotic image for contrast with the mundane surroundings. In Evelyn Waugh’s *Scoop*, Waugh shows one of his characters, Mr. Salter, trying to talk William into going to a banquet:

Mr. Salter was not in fighting form and he knew it. The strength was gone out of him. He was dirty and blistered and aching in every limb, cold sober and unsuitably dressed. He was in a strange country. These people were not his people nor their laws his. He felt like a Roman legionary, heavily armed, weighted with the steel and cast brass of civilization, tramping through forests beyond the Roman pale, harassed by silent, elusive savages, the vanguard of an advance that had pushed too far and lost touch with the base...or was he the abandoned rearguard of a retreat; had the legions sailed?<sup>12</sup>

Mr. Salter is in fact in the library of a run-down country house, but there is nothing preventing Waugh from sending him anywhere, momentarily, in the interests of creating more vivid surroundings. All that is required is a connection—we cannot ignore coherence—between the two terrains; and as we see here, such a connection can be created out of any similarity, however fanciful, to the character’s situation.

Writers avoid the mundane in other ways as well. They may choose bizarre settings, often introducing these with a deliberately noncommittal—hence contrastive—style, as Merrill Joan Gerber does in the following passage from her story “Chattering Man”:

A dog was getting electrocuted on a tightrope just inside the door of the art gallery. Three times that semester I had dragged Ben to the Jonathan Borofsky exhibit. This time I told him I needed to view it with the intention of tying Borofsky’s approach into my Kafka paper. I told him Borofsky was a living master of significant transformation. When I walked in the door, I had the feeling I had come back to my

own little planet where it was possible to breathe. Flares of flame shot from the dog's prancing paws. Back and forth he went on the video screen, dancing on the burning wire, his paws on fire.<sup>13</sup>

Gerber has not just introduced a highly contrastive scene here: she has attached it firmly both to her story and to "real life." Less graceful writers sometimes force exoticism into the story by creating grotesqueries that are not anchored adequately either in story or reality, so that the reader experiences a nagging feeling that the writer is taking liberties with our ability to suspend disbelief. And our ability to suspend disbelief appears to depend on the author's ability to rewrite temporarily the rules of coherence.

The author may also create contrast out of scenes from the character's imagination or memory. The *locus classicus* for this process is James Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," where the events of the main character's life are hopelessly mundane: Walter Mitty is dominated by his wife and sets out to achieve two goals she has set him—to buy overshoes and puppy biscuit. While he is pursuing these goals, his rich, if clichéd, fantasy life is contrasted with his mundane real life:

Pandemonium broke loose in the courtroom. A woman's scream rose above the bedlam and suddenly a lovely, dark-haired girl was in Walter Mitty's arms. The District Attorney struck at her savagely. Without rising from his chair, Mitty let the man have it on the point of the chin. "You miserable cur!"

"Puppy biscuit," said Walter Mitty. He stopped walking and the buildings of Waterbury rose up out of the misty courtroom and surrounded him again. A woman who was passing laughed. "He said 'Puppy biscuit,'" she said to her companion. "That man said 'puppy biscuit' to himself."<sup>14</sup>

Here we see the dramatic and the mundane contrasted, while the transitions between them always relate the two: Mitty says the word "cur" in his fantasy and is thereby reminded that he is supposed to buy puppy biscuit. Throughout the story, Thurber connects the two narratives with common motifs: when Walter Mitty recalls feeling humiliated the time his wife made him go to a garage to get the chains taken off the wheels of the car, he imagines wearing his right arm in a sling the next time. "They

won't grin at me then." This motif is taken up in the next scene in his fantasy: "'Objection!' shouted Mitty's attorney. 'We have shown that the defendant could not have fired the shot. We have shown that he wore his right arm in a sling on the night of the fourteenth of July.'" <sup>15</sup>

Such motifs combine nicely the two demands of rhetoric that I have focused on: they create newness and coherence at the same time—the one because the reader is surprised when they reappear, the other because they prevent the two stories, the mundane version and the fantasy, from being disconnected.

It is largely because of their imagery that, in a given scene, competent writers are likely to use more words than incompetent writers, rather than fewer. As we have seen, it is easy to summarize a scene in a novel without a loss of significant information, unless you acknowledge that all those qualities of the language that keep us reading are indeed significant. But good writers can also find more of interest to say than the rest of us, and they recognize that hoarding words is not their highest priority. We see an extreme form of this prolixity in Proust, who published *À la Recherche du temps perdu* at his own expense after an editor wrote to him saying, "My dear fellow, I may perhaps be dead from the neck up, but rack my brains as I may I can't see why a chap should need thirty pages to describe how he turns over in bed before going to sleep." <sup>16</sup> Proust may have lost the battle, but he surely won the war.

Because of their immediacy—their non-abstractness—images are necessary if you wish to create intense sensory experience in the reader or listener. Let us imagine that, for reasons of your own, you wish to make someone disgusted: the traditional, time-honored method is not just to describe a disgusting object or material, but to put it into an image from eating or drinking. Surely this is why the gigantic yellow slugs of the redwoods, in northern California, are called banana slugs. It is not just their color that is at issue. Their name conveys the disgust people feel when they first see them—it is like seeing a pimple the size of a butterscotch sundae—so if we didn't call them "banana slugs," we would probably have to call them "ladyfinger slugs." That is, the most disgustingly vivid thing you can do is link the object to eating or drinking, as I did with the pimple and the butterscotch sundae, for which I would like to apologize.

Because it is contrast that makes the image vivid, the writer is likely to fetch images from sources as different as possible from the thing that is suffering the comparison. That is, you wouldn't compare a potato to a yam. The problem is complicated by the fact that much of what we talk about is unapproachable *except* through imagery. Emotions, for example. Try to make the following statement in an interesting, understandable way: "She was suffering severe emotional pain." Any writer would reject this sentence as deficient of all newness whatsoever. And in fiction you would lose your reader if you went over to a detailed elaboration of psychological symptoms. So you're stuck with going directly to something that begins with "She felt as if—".

Here I must cheerfully acknowledge that many writers appear to have been born with a more direct and intuitive grasp of imagery than I have after decades of studying the subject. Nathanael West, even at an early age, would surely have thought this project one of the simpler forms of child's play—of a complexity with chewing on your teddy bear. Lacking West's talents, I once put a ridiculous amount of time and effort into this very problem. In the end I made do with the following sentence: "But this pain was not like that of a cut that heals; it was like a porcupine quill working its way through your flesh, and aimed at your heart." This at least brings together diverse things: the human heart and a porcupine quill. But like most imagery, it does nothing more than state in a new way something so general as to be meaningless. It's not as if I found a way of revealing new information about emotional pain. And here we may as well admit that successful writing can be utterly devoid in anything resembling original thought, as long as the writer expresses the known and vapid in a bright and clever way. Indeed, almost any ideas may be taken seriously if they are nicely expressed, which is why politicians employ speechwriters.

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It is coherence that demands that metaphors not be mixed. Jane E. Aaron gives this example of a mixed metaphor: "Various thorny problems that we try to sweep under the rug continue to bob up all the same."<sup>17</sup> Here the metaphor is a bit shaky right at the beginning, where the problems are given thorns and then swept under the rug. Even if thorns were commonly swept under rugs, most writers would reject both images

as trite—why use an image at all if it is not vivid? But when those same thorns bob to the surface of the rug, as if the rug had turned liquid without warning, we have a classic mixed metaphor. It is difficult to study mixed metaphors, because they seldom make their way into print. The copy editor, the coherence-seeking left brain of the Press, wielding the sword of congruity, strikes them out of the text. Assuming that she doesn't drive the sword of congruity deep into that last sentence, it will serve as further illustration. The metaphor is mixed because brains don't typically wield swords, while swords "strike" but don't "strike out." Most books on style simply warn against mixed metaphors, but a rule deduced from usage would read something like this: you usually shouldn't mix your metaphors, but if you do, the reader has to be aware that you did it deliberately, and the mix had better be funny.

I mentioned Nathanael West's willingness to sacrifice some accuracy for lots of vividness in his choice of words. Writers sacrifice clarity for vividness also, as when they use dialect. Dialect has the advantage that it offers the reader a great deal of newness, and the corresponding disadvantage that it is harder to understand than the standard literary language. As a result, writers generally compromise with dialect, giving the reader a version of it that is fairly easy to follow. And they cut back even further on dialect when there is a danger that it could cause the reader to lose track of the story. In Scott's *Heart of Midlothian*, Jeannie Deans speaks Scottish dialect until she makes a decision that is important to the course of the novel, and then she expresses this in standard English.<sup>18</sup> "My sister shall come out in the face of the sun," said Jeanie; 'I will go to London, and beg her pardon from the king and queen.'"<sup>19</sup> It won't do to risk confusing the reader.

The writer wants the vividness of a distinctive language but shies away from anything too opaque. In historical novels, the typical solution is to create a kind of compromise language cobbled together out of the (modern) language of the reader and bits and pieces of archaic diction. Here is *Ivanhoe* in a passion: "Hound of the Temple—stain to thine Order—set free the damsel! Traitor of Bois-Guilbert, it is *Ivanhoe* commands thee! Villain, I will have thy heart's blood!"<sup>20</sup>

Actual Middle English (*Ivanhoe* is set at the end of the twelfth century) does not resemble Scott's version at all. Indeed, even some of



the letters it uses are unfamiliar to us, notably the thorn and the ash.<sup>D</sup> But the diction of the historical novel is really the result of a process of elimination that makes the least offensive choice. The writer may set the story in a former time (or a future time) in large part because the setting is not familiar and therefore has great potential for vividness. Having done this, the writer has to cope with the problem of diction. We all agree that it wouldn't do to use modern diction in a historical novel (that would be an anachronism and offend our notions of plausibility), and even if the writer could master it, it wouldn't do to use the original language (that would interfere with the reader's understanding). So we choose an archaized language that is free of obvious anachronisms and a great deal less opaque than the original language. (In time this language becomes conventional, and then boredom sets in.)

Overwhelmingly, as in *Finnegan's Wake*, the non-standard part of the language is its diction; syntax is typically modern, although word order may suffer an occasional discomfiture in the interests of archaism. And the diction has a pronounced preference for words the reader is familiar with but no longer uses, like "damsel" in the *Ivanhoe* quotation. Such words, by having gone out of popular usage, have lost some of the familiarity that makes words boring to us.

The writer is confronted with some ungainly difficulties in the historical novel. For example, Scott has characters in *Ivanhoe* who are Jewish, and he knows that he must somehow make them sound like medieval Jews, but who knows how *they* talked? And here we see how popular preconceptions grab and shake the author even when he or she is trying to be "realistic." As real-life figures, medieval Jews were surely like the rest of us: diverse and complex and full of surprises. But for Scott's purposes, it is more important that his medieval Jews be recognizably "Jewish" to his readers than that they be formed out of factual details gathered from historical inquiry, so he reduces them to a few qualities either known or imagined by his readers. And since in Christendom the most distinctive quality of the Jews was that they had a

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D. The thorn, *Þ*, is the letter that once provided the *th* of *the*. Once it was disappearing from the language and was seen only on old signs (for inns, say), it was reinterpreted as a *y*, making "ye olde" out of "the olde," that is, *Pe olde*.

different religion, Scott makes his characters “Jewish” by giving them Old Testament diction: “Go thou,” said Nathan Ben Israel, “and be wise, for wisdom availed Daniel in the den of lions into which he was cast; and may it go well with thee, even as thine heart wisheth.”<sup>21</sup>

One may object that whatever medieval Jews were like, they were surely not like *Scott’s* medieval Jews, but this objection seems to me to miss the point. Scott has an all but impossible task: he must create characters who seem right to his reader, but his reader’s information about medieval Jewry is woefully inadequate. And the reader views his or her memory-store of information as the basis of the “true-to-life” type of coherence even if, viewed objectively, that information is fairly riddled with untruth. This is why prejudices contribute to coherence. So even if Scott knew everything there was to know about the real-life equivalents of his Jewish characters, he would probably give in finally to the expectations of his readers. He can’t give the readers something that they don’t agree makes sense.

And if we see his stereotypes of the Jews as the result of prejudice, then we must see prejudice in his stereotypes of his heroes as well—they too suffer from the reductionism of stereotyping—and what could be more even-handed than a writer who makes stereotypes out of everybody?<sup>E</sup>

I have argued that imagery gets around the deadly familiarity of language by putting words together in unfamiliar ways. If we cannot have new words, then we shall at least have new combinations. It is like someone getting very bored with quince jelly on their toast in the morning and horseradish sauce on their prime rib in the evening, but that is all there is to eat, so they decide to try the horseradish on the toast and the quince jelly on the prime rib.<sup>F</sup> As we shall see in the next chapters, the writer is put in a similar dilemma when creating a story: most of us want stories that retell our favorite fantasies, yet these fantasies—and hence the stories they are embedded in—are altogether too familiar to us.

What to do?



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E. See John Sutherland’s biography of Scott for a discussion of Scott and anti-Semitism.

F. This is my explanation for why people serve roast lamb with mint jelly.

## References:

1. Dickens, *Hard Times*, 1-2.
2. *Gesangbuch*, 46.
3. *Gesangbuch*, 56.
4. *Gesangbuch*, 137.
5. West, *The Day of the Locust*, 60.
6. West, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 16.
7. Koestler, quoted in Hobbs, 179.
8. Burgess, quoted in Winokur, 49.
9. Butler, quoted in Winokur, 36.
10. William Hazlitt, "On Wit and Humor," in Dukore, 604.
11. Dickens, *Hard Times*, 2.
12. Waugh, 210.
13. Gerber, *Chattering Man*, 9-10.
14. Thurber, 40.
15. Thurber, 40.
16. Marc Humblot, quoted in Cerf and Navasky, 159.
17. Aaron, 62.
18. An observation by Peter Demetz in a class at Yale, many years ago, on European realism.
19. Scott, *The Heart of Midlothian*, 245.
20. Scott, *Ivanhoe*, 339-40 (Chapter XXXI).
21. Scott, *Ivanhoe*, 389 (Chapter XXXV).

## Chapter Seven

### Strange Visitor from Another Planet

*Superman*: I don't like to *repeat* myself... Crook-catching can get *dull* if you do the same things over and over.<sup>1</sup>

No one would put on a two-man show without sharply differentiating the two characters, which means that if the one is hurried and irritable, the other must be phlegmatic and good-natured; if the one is sloppy and casual, the other must be tidy and prim. *The Odd Couple* may be taken as a typical example of this phenomenon; neither Neil Simon nor any other successful playwright writes plays about people who are like each other and in complete agreement.

The issues become more complicated, however, when we add the demand for coherence to the demand for contrast. We already have two characters who must differ from one another; now we shall demand that they also limit their interaction in such a way that we cannot find irrelevant anything that happens to them. They are like a mountaineer setting off to climb Everest: something of the purpose and grandeur would be lost if he came back down in a couple of days saying that he forgot his thermos of hot milk. The hot milk may be important to the mountaineer, but to the audience it is a distraction. The story must march onward through events that derive from one another in some gratifying way—they stay within a frame of reference bounded by coherence—and move toward an ending that must also not be irrelevant or accidental. And because we have more than one standard of coherence to apply to the story, we may expect it to be “logical” or “true to life,” or both.

We have put together two demands that, taken together, will restrict our choices severely. But we are in a heroic mood; we need greater challenges, and we do not yet have a story. Creating a story is easy—even if it is bounded by contrast and coherence—but if we wish it to be popular, then we may have to adapt it to some typical human fantasy.

And here is where constraint sets in: human beings simply do not have many fantasies. If you doubt this, think back to how often you were able to figure out what would happen next in a movie or television program. Are the writers dull? Not the writers I know: but once they let us in on the particular fantasy they are exploiting, we know nearly as much about it as they do. They are like a man trying to hide Christmas presents in a room furnished only with a couple of folding chairs and a glass-topped coffee table.

Before we applied our first requirement, our characters were free as a bird, but then they became more like two flightless birds, different in appearance and habits, thrown together by circumstance, and with a somewhat tense relationship—a frivolous ostrich, say, and a moody penguin. And when we force them to stay within a coherent frame of reference, while acting out a typical fantasy, their freedom is less like that of a bird than like that of a large earthworm exploring a small drinking straw.

We can see how these limits work if we create a fantasy designed for the requirements of someone who feels powerless, resentful, and isolated. And here is our first catch: the working hypothesis of genre fiction and psychology both is that such people are given to grandiosity. Therefore, to make the fantasy attractive, we shall stylize the hero's sense of isolation to give it a heroic dimension—it would not do to let him appear merely strange, for our reader is encouraged to identify with him—and, by giving him power, we shall simultaneously give him the means to act on his resentments. These resentments must not be unreasonable ones; they must be resentments toward manifest injustice. Otherwise we'll lose our reader, whose own resentments are always accompanied by the finest and most exquisite justification. Our hero, then, will become a crime-fighter.



C'est une grave erreur de n'opposer à un héros qu'un adversaire sans valeur...

It is a serious mistake to set up against a hero none but an opponent without worth.

— Gide, *Journal* <sup>2</sup>

If we carry this fantasy to an extreme, we may make our hero faster than a speeding bullet and able to leap tall buildings with a single bound.<sup>A</sup> We started with grandiose dreams of power and ended with Superman. Now think about Superman for a moment: he can fly, can't be hurt, has x-ray vision, and is so powerful that he can demolish an asteroid with a right cross. What is wrong with this picture?

What's wrong with it is that if Superman can be neither hurt nor defeated, it becomes monstrously difficult to create effective drama for him. Drama requires roughly equal forces: Superman fighting street criminals is like a prize-fighter brawling with a kitten. Imagine Superman being waylaid by a street gang: one of them empties his automatic at Superman, then flings it at him—they always did this, don't ask me why—and Superman slaps him down, whereupon, as the fellow spits his teeth out onto the sidewalk, the others remember urgent business and drift away. No fun there.

If the hero's opponent is a weakling, then the hero is no hero. It is this dilemma that forces us, in our war propaganda, to portray our enemies as fanatical automatons, as we did the Germans and the Japanese in the Second World War. We were courageous, whereas they were zealots who didn't value human life, even their own. Our soldiers made the ultimate sacrifice in defense of their fellows; theirs were in the grip of a thuggish fanaticism. We may wish to ascribe every imaginable weakness to them, but our own heroism is impugned if our enemies are not at least brave and strong. Thus Homer is obliged to treat Hector, the enemy of the Achaeans, as a hero who has more in common with the Greek heroes than with the weakling Paris. And the author of the *Nibelungenlied* does the same with Hagen.

The problem of invincibility is surely a major reason why, as a character in literature, God was retired and given a gold watch when He became all-powerful and omniscient. The Greeks did not have this problem: Zeus could be deceived, even seduced. But for Goethe to show a contest between God and Devil, he had to choose a man, Faust, as a

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A. The reader may wonder why Superman would not just fly over this tall building, but when he was created, Superman couldn't fly at all. He could leap an eighth of a mile (220 yards). He also didn't have x-ray vision.

surrogate for Him, and then put him in a contest with a relatively minor devil, and a late-comer at that (Mephistopheles was one of seven devils in late medieval demonology). And as it is, God—being God, and able to do as He likes—simply announces a new rule when Faust appears to have lost the contest: Faust tried hard, He says, and therefore he can be saved. This is the divine rationale on which teachers, even to this day, base their practice of moving failing students from one grade to the next.

There is a classic solution to the dilemma of the too-powerful character, and it was invented in ancient Greece and revived in medieval Germany. Once you create an invincible, invulnerable hero, and just after you realize to your dismay that nothing bad can happen to him, you invent for him a specific kind of vulnerability, of which the type site, to borrow a metaphor from archaeology, is Achilles' famous heel. (Homer says nothing of this, but he doesn't have to kill Achilles off.) Achilles is not the only hero of the Trojan wars with this kind of protection/vulnerability. According to a post-Homeric story, the greater Ajax was made invulnerable when Herakles wrapped him in the skin of the Nemean lion—except that the skin didn't touch Ajax in one place, which is why he could later commit suicide. In the *Nibelungenlied*, Siegfried bathed in dragon's blood to attain invulnerability, but a leaf fell on him during his bath and created a vulnerable area defined by the shape of the leaf of *Tilia europaea*, the European linden tree.

This is why Superman loses his strength when exposed to Kryptonite, and this is why his x-ray vision, like a real x-ray, is blocked by lead. It is this vulnerability that makes it possible for his opponents, the criminals, to have a fighting chance, thereby maintaining our interest. The Achilles heel, however, in spite of its value in providing vulnerability, has a serious design limitation: it is inflexible. This is surely why, with Achilles and Siegfried, it is used mostly to keep open the possibility that they can be overcome: it would simply be comical if Achilles' battles were given length and substance by causing him to flop down every time someone got in a lucky whack on his ankle; or if Siegfried swooned every time he was tapped on his linden leaf. But suspense, otherwise absent with an invulnerable hero, can be created if the audience knows that the hero can in fact be vanquished. The French comic-book series *Astérix* deals with this problem in an especially clever way: there the heroes'

superior strength and invulnerability derive from a magic potion, which means that many of the stories create drama out of questions such as, Will the heroes locate the stolen magic potion? Will the potion wear off too soon?



*Calvin* [as Stupendous Man]: Now I can fight crime without anyone knowing my true identity!

*Hobbes*: Why do you care that nobody knows your identity?

We are not through setting Superman up with the trappings necessary for a functioning serial. We simply cannot rely on Kryptonite for page-turning drama, for in its presence the Man of Steel is too weak for his task, and away from it he is too powerful.<sup>B</sup> What we shall do in addition is create page-turners—the little dramas that eke out the story—by requiring that Superman not only fight crime *but conceal his identity while doing so*.

The secret-identity motif is a complex one. On the face of it, there seems to be no compelling reason for Superman to conceal his identity: he is, after all, the Man of Steel. And it makes little sense for a master crime-fighter to spend much of his time writing newspaper copy for the *Daily Planet*. This is as if Homer were to show Hector sweeping out the Trojan citadel and preparing dinner when he comes back from a hard day bashing the heads of the Achaeans. In 1939, Superman explained his need for a day job by saying, “If I get news dispatches promptly, I’ll be in a better position to help people.”<sup>3</sup> Superboy, on the other hand, used a secret identity “so that people won’t mob me whenever I want privacy.”<sup>4</sup>

Surely the reasons for the secret identity changed because they are not based on notions of “real life” at all. The narrative advantages of the secret identity are clear: even if we cannot easily threaten Superman’s person, we can threaten to reveal his identity, and this threat, unlike the

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B. Clearly the writers of the Superman comics understood the limitations of the vulnerability they had invented for Superman, for they kept tinkering with Kryptonite. Finally, in the fifties, they introduced red Kryptonite, which always did something to Superman, but never the same thing.



other, can pervade the story. At any moment Lois Lane might notice that, mysteriously, Clark Kent and Superman have never been seen together. True: it is not immediately clear what harm this would do—Lois Lane is a friend, not an enemy—and it is also not clear how she knows that Superman even has a secret identity. After all, in “real life,” almost the only people who maintain secret identities are writers of genre fiction and criminals.



**Fig. 3. Fiction vs. the real world.**

(Courtesy Dan Piraro. ©1999 King Features Syndicate)

There are other ways in which the “real-world” basis of the secret identity is weak. In *The Lone Ranger* the hero concealed his identity merely by putting a little eye-mask on, just as Superman became a nerd, and unidentifiable, by putting on glasses. It is important to conceal the

character's identity, but it is even more important to avoid having two heroes who appear to have nothing to do with each other—that violates coherence—so the time-honored solution is to give the hero a disguise that doesn't really disguise, and leave it to the reader to imagine that a pair of glasses makes the Man of Steel into a nerd. Conversely, in the Superman radio plays, Superman and Clark Kent had to be distinguished from one another so the listener would know which of the two was speaking. That problem was solved by having a single actor, Clayton Collyer, read the one part as a tenor, the other as a baritone.<sup>5</sup> That way Superman and Clark Kent were both connected and differentiated.



A masquerade ball in a strange city hardly represented Elaine's idea of enjoyment. Carefully to disguise one's identity in a neighborhood where one was entirely unknown seemed to her rather meaningless.

—Saki, *The Unbearable Bassington*<sup>6</sup>

The secret identity is all-compelling to the characters in these stories. In *The Lone Ranger*, when the villains got the hero in their power, they invariably proved obsessed not with revenge but with discovery: “Now we’re just gonna see who’s behind that mask.”

In the theater, also, disguise is easy; indeed, a man can become a woman, and vice versa, merely by cross-dressing. If you did this in real life, your friends might say something like, “Gee, Fred, I couldn’t help noticing that you’re wearing a dress today.” But in the theater, the point is to confound the other characters, not the audience. If the disguise is too good, and if the audience is taken in, or loses track of who’s who through a moment of inattention, then the action becomes confusing. So, by convention, the characters are allowed to be taken in by a disguise that doesn’t fool the audience. There is an elegant solution to this problem, now a bit shopworn: since it is the face that is most recognizable, the author can put the characters at a masked ball, so that, simply by switching masks in secret, they can conceal their identities from everyone but the audience. And then sharp forms of contrast come about as characters

begin to interact in ways that they could never in “real life.” Key characters may be color-coded or given a distinctive mask, or—in movies—the camera may keep track of them for the audience, again to avoid confusion. On the stage, the character may be given a mask held on a stick, so that, by turning sideways, he is recognizable to the audience but not to the character in front of him. Shakespeare uses the mask in *Romeo and Juliet* to cause two lovers to meet who in real life would never get to know each other, since their families are feuding. And to let the audience know who is who, the director usually has Romeo take his mask down when he is talking to his friends. The point is to get Romeo and Juliet together plausibly, not to confound the audience or even the Capulets: the mask in fact doesn’t work—Tybalt recognizes Romeo by his voice! But he is forbidden to kill Romeo, presumably so that the play won’t come to a premature end.

There is much in the masked-ball motif that is the purest convention. At real masked balls, according to dancers I have talked to, you seldom have any trouble recognizing your friends. Moreover, people (nowadays, at least) never dance very long before they take off their masks, since the masks are hard to breathe in, difficult to see through, and hold in heat. Dorothy Sayers remarks on the inconvenience of masks in *Murder Must Advertise*: “His costume was hot and heavy, and the sweat poured down his face beneath the stifling black folds of his hood.”<sup>7</sup> Because of this, if you ever wear a mask for any length of time while climbing up the sides of buildings, you’ll gain new respect for Batman and Robin.

If the real-world basis of Superman’s secret identity is weak, its function as a source of contrast is powerful. Not only can the secret identity be threatened, but it is self-contrastive, for it would be wasted effort to create two identities for your character if you didn’t make them as different as possible. This is one of the two principal reasons why Zorro, in his public life, is a foppish wastrel: an energetic hero contrasts more strongly with a lazy wastrel than he does with, say, a successful rancher. If Zorro were evil, he would probably be a priest in his other identity (“a wolf in sheep’s clothing”). Good and evil, philosophical opposites, are in drama chained together like Prometheus and his mountain.

So by putting on his suit and glasses, Superman becomes Clark Kent, and Clark Kent becomes everything Superman is not. Superman is

fearless, Clark Kent is timid; Superman makes the ladies swoon, Clark Kent makes them roll their eyes. Moreover, Clark Kent's friends and associates—Jimmy Olson and Lois Lane—serve to make Superman vulnerable in yet another way: any threat to them threatens Superman. This is a kind of vulnerability that has far more elegant and subtle plotting possibilities than Kryptonite ever could. If you make Superman's friends a bit rash and careless, and very, very curious, they will be captured by villains with great regularity and give Kryptonite and the secret identity a rest.

I said that there were two principal reasons why Zorro is a wastrel in his public persona. The other reason is that the secret identity, however valuable it is for contrast, surely derives ultimately from a demand of the particular romantic fantasy that is expressed in both *Zorro* and *Superman*. If your story is designed to eke out the fantasy life of a reader who feels powerless and isolated, you can hardly do better than create a hero who *appears* powerless and isolated—like the reader—but is actually neither. Besides the contrast between appearance and reality, there is a compelling form of self-pitying grandiosity: “if they only knew who they’re dealing with.” Surely this is why it is not just the villain but Lois Lane—the beautiful, desirable woman who loves Superman and is a bit contemptuous of Clark Kent—who threatens Superman's secret identity. Lois Lane is the reader's fantasy girlfriend, the gorgeous brunette who if she ever noticed him would think he was a geek. But this geeky quality of his is only put on; it is a ruse to confound his enemies. *Superman* did not invent the secret identity: it was borrowed from fiction such as Johnston McCulley's *Curse of Capistrano*, which gave us Zorro, whose secret identity makes better real-world sense. Zorro, after all, is neither invulnerable nor all-powerful; if he is found out, he will suffer serious consequences.

In the modern *Spiderman* we see the dual identity carried out to an extreme. Like Superman, Spiderman appears to have a secret identity not for “logical” or “true-to-life” reasons but because the secret identity creates contrast and dramatic possibilities and fulfills the fantasies of the reader. But *Spiderman* carries the process a step further, making its hero, in his secret identity, into an even more marginal character than Clark Kent. In *Spiderman*, as in the early Batman comics, the police often view

the superhero as a criminal and have been trying to capture him for years, which allows the reader his favorite self-pitying fantasy: “if they only knew.” This also contributes a form of vulnerability to the superhero (the criminals may get away because the police interfere, or the police may even try to arrest Spiderman). He is also given much-needed vulnerability by occasionally running out of web fluid just when he needs it.

In addition, Spiderman is bullied by his boss and kvetches non-stop about how he can’t make any money or get ahead in his career. Now I ask you! If you could run up and down the sides of buildings, with a mask on yet, and had superhuman strength, could you not at least find a good job? Yet this is finally an unfair criticism, for “logic” and “real life” are not the web fluid that holds *Spiderman* together: the reader’s fantasy does that. The authors of *Spiderman* somehow have to reconcile two people, one real, one fictional: a reader who feels dispossessed and resents authority and a superhero who is supposed to fulfill the reader’s fantasies, which combine self-pity with grandiosity.

If you leave out Superman’s (or Spiderman’s) secret identity, the possibilities for drama diminish rapidly. Imagine that Batman and Robin opt for early retirement in Gotham City, taking their pensions, and Superman applies there for the job of Superhero. Commissioner Gordon has had it up to here with secret identities, so he makes it a condition of employment that Superman be a civil servant like everyone else, with a single identity, locked into his social security number, and the usual conditions for overtime and vacations. In the meantime, a spy satellite has located the hideout of the evil Dr. Maybe, who is trying to decide whether to take over the world.

The Commissioner rushes into the squad room. “We’ve learned,” he cries out, “that the evil doctor is holed up in a fortress outside the little Austrian town of Hochschwangerau!”<sup>C</sup>

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C. If the villain isn’t in an isolated fortress, it’s more difficult to have that monstrous and soul-satisfying explosion at the end. Modern fiction doesn’t even bother to explain why such fortresses are always rigged with explosives or filled with flammables. We simply expect them to be—such is the power of narrative convention over probability. Sometimes the fortress is located in a volcano, and then the explosions generally set off an eruption—best not to calculate the probabilities here either. This was done in the fifth James Bond film, *You Only Live Twice* (1967).

A detective stares at him with a pained expression. “For Christ’s sake, just have Superman fly over, bust the doors down, and arrest him.”

“Oh, right,” says the Commissioner. “*Damn*, this job is easy.”

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The Superman comics, after a run of some fifty years or so, ended some years ago, but not before they had used up countless possibilities of drama involving Superman. I stopped reading them at an early age, and even then they had generated other lines of comics: Superman as a boy (Superboy), who had his own secret identity, and Supergirl. There were even a few tentative strips featuring Superbaby. Superboy, living in a different environment from the adult Superman—small-town America, rather than the big city—exploited different possibilities. But always the comics played to the same fantasy of the seeming milquetoast who is actually more powerful than a speeding locomotive. The advertisements on the inside of the back cover were keyed to the same fantasies: there was Charles Atlas, with beautiful women hanging on him, promising that if you just sent in the coupon no bully at the beach would ever kick sand in your face again.

By the time I came across a Superman comic book again, as an adult, I discovered that Superman had finally found worthy opponents: extraterrestrial superheroes, as powerful as he was, seeking to take over the world. Lex Luthor (originally just “Luthor”) solves the tricky problem of creating drama with a hero who is overmatched against any human opponent. Like science fiction, the Superman comics moved out into space in search of new possibilities for drama. And they carried with them the grandiosity of readers with two great dreams: saving the world from destruction and not having sand kicked in their faces.

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## Chapter Eight

### The Familiarity Quotient

For people praise that song the most  
that is the newest to those listening.

—Homer, *Odyssey* 1.351-2

...for the one rule is to be infinitely various; to interest,  
to disappoint, to surprise, and yet still to gratify; to be  
ever changing, as it were, the stitch, and yet still to give  
the effect of an ingenious neatness.

—Robert Louis Stevenson, *On Some Technical  
Elements of Style in Literature*<sup>1</sup>

Make it new.

—Ezra Pound<sup>2</sup>

Just as the familiarity of words places the writer in a dilemma, so does a similar problem with the choice of subject. For fiction to be popular, it evidently has to tap into common needs, longings, fantasies, and myths; yet as it exploits these efficiently, the resulting stories inevitably come to resemble one another, so that they are infected with the dullness of familiarity. It is a kind of Catch-22: the writer must write like everyone else to match the needs of the reader, yet doing so risks boring the reader.

Editors are keenly aware of this dilemma. Many editors, in return for a self-addressed, stamped envelope, will send a writer guidelines to their magazine or book line. When, back in the eighties, I sent for these en masse, I found that most of the top trade publishers merely sent a note back saying they didn't accept anything not submitted by an agent, and the little magazines—the ones that offer “payment” in the form of two copies of their magazine—responded mostly with sterile details of style and attempts to get me to subscribe. But there was a middle category of

publications that sent back detailed analyses of their needs. In particular, the better science fiction magazines offered a wealth of information on their needs, and their editors were uniformly conscious of the need for both contrast and coherence in fiction. In these guidelines (some of which haven't changed in many years and can now be found on the Internet), contrast might be expressed in adjectives such as "new," "original," "different," "vivid," "fresh," and "interesting." It might also be expressed as "conflict," or even "growth" of the characters (since a character is altered and therefore shows a new aspect to the reader).<sup>A</sup> One editor said, "[we] are looking for new, original, thought-provoking fiction..."<sup>3</sup>

Coherence might be demanded in the form of "realism," a "single direction or focus," "logic," an outcome that is "a direct result of action or decision of the main character," "believable events and characters," and "consistency."

Often editors got in both demands:

We want to be aggressive about breaking new ground. We want to push the envelope a little farther with every story we print and every issue we publish. We want stories that not only stand at the frontier of speculative fiction, but expand that frontier. The ideal story for us is truly original, certifiably trend-setting, unmistakably unique. It is a story the likes of which no one has ever seen in print before. In style, presentation, or subject matter—or all three—it breaks through the old boundaries of the genre and defines new ones. If a manuscript doesn't have at least one new idea, one new method of telling the story, one new way of exciting the reader, it's probably not a story that we'd prefer to publish.

How can you tell if the story you've written, or the story you're planning to write, fits our conception of the ideal? ...before you send something to us, try to look at it objectively and answer these questions:

Is the story different in theme or plot from any other stories you've read or heard about? Are the characters portrayed realistically, and are they also unique individuals instead of being stereotypes? Does the

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A. But this is not to suggest that this is the only reason for causing a character to change.



plot have conflict or intrigue, or some other feature that will hold the reader's interest and make him care about what is happening? Is the story fast moving, with a single direction and a definite focus? Does it use language aggressively and vividly? Does the style and pacing make the reader want to keep turning the pages? Is the conclusion a logical outgrowth of what preceded it? Is the ending a direct result of action or decision on the part of the main character(s)?<sup>4</sup>

Even as editors tell you that they want the new, they suggest strongly that to achieve the new, you must know the old. One editor said, "Read all the science fiction classics and current magazines to understand the field and to avoid clichés."<sup>5</sup> The editor of a feminist magazine wrote, "It is imperative that women read our magazine before submitting. We have a very specific focus which is related to women's spirituality and is best understood by studying past issues. And all materials must relate directly to one of our themes."<sup>6</sup>

Magazine editors routinely include an order form in their response to inquiries, so that the writer can order copies of the magazine and find out what is published in it. This is not merely a ploy to sell copies of the magazine—and some editors point this out. It is intended to ensure that the writer will stay within the world of meaning that the magazine exploits. The male reader who is shopping for hard science fiction is apt to be put off if he finds that he has bought a feminist tract set in Dark Fantasy, just as you would be irritated if you bought a bag of Granny Smith apples and on getting home discovered you'd been given russet potatoes instead.<sup>B</sup>

Book editors commonly suggest that you read some of their more successful titles. And sometimes they place their demands for newness and oldness in the same sentence: "In either science fiction or fantasy, we strongly advise writers to read some of our published books to see what

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B. Writers commonly ignore the suggestion that they become thoroughly familiar with the editor's magazine, just as they ignore the editor's demand that they not submit to more than one magazine at a time. These seem such reasonable demands that editors don't think to count up the decades it would take to get anything published if the writer gave in. I asked one writer, who confessed to submitting to ten magazines at a time, what happened when several editors accepted a submission. "Hah!" she said. "What are the odds?"

we like—but we also want to see ideas and approaches we haven’t yet published.”<sup>7</sup>

The same editor says, “Novels should be well-plotted, with logical resolutions, not using coincidence or *deus ex machina* tricks. The main character should be generally likable and the problems must seem important to him/her and to readers. Well-developed backgrounds, originality, logical development, and consistency are desirable.”

This seems to me an admirably clear and concise analysis of the needs of the editor and reader. Let us consider these demands for a moment: the editor wants the novel to be well plotted—that is, to stay with a single central problem that is constantly rejuvenated. Plot itself, as we shall see, comes about through a kind of armistice between the demand for the new, or contrastive, and the demand for the old, or coherent. So plot implies order and logic, which the arbitrary *deus ex machina* is at odds with, as are all forms of coincidence. The *deus ex machina*, after all, was originally just a salvage operation mounted by playwrights like Euripides whose stories had wandered away from the myths they were supposed to recount.

The hero “should be generally likable.” This is a demand that derives from his or her function as a surrogate for the reader. We view fictional characters pretty much the way we view real people, and it is difficult to get caught up in their lives if we don’t like them or feel that they make stupid decisions. The objective of the writer, after all, is to create a hero who can function as a vehicle for the fantasy life of the reader. If the reader dislikes the hero, the effort fails.

All this so far implies the known—and somewhat shopworn—universe. But the editor also wants originality. Here we might remind ourselves that the very word “novel” is derived from a word meaning “new.” In practice, the writer finds that the need for originality is urgent but limited. You are encouraged to create an original voice, a manner of writing that is distinctive. But in genre fiction you would be ill advised to create an underlying fantasy that doesn’t tap into typical human anxieties and aspirations. It is good if your hero is from a part of society—or a part of the universe!—that hasn’t been over-exploited, but bad if his or her psychology is different from ours.

And the demand for the believable does not necessarily imply human form, just human psychology. “The science can be physical, sociological, psychological. The technology can be anything from electronic engineering to biogenetic engineering. But the stories must be strong and realistic, with believable people (who needn’t be human) doing believable things—no matter how fantastic the background might be.”<sup>8</sup>

Another science fiction editor says, “A story **MUST** be about one or more characters, who strive to attain a goal or objective, who meet with one or more obstacles, often, but not always, of a threatening nature, and who contend with this obstacle, meeting either with success or failure. Success or failure should come about as the result of the efforts and/or the weaknesses of the characters, not merely random events. Characters should show some change, growth or development as a result of the events of the story. We like stories with good characterization, conflict, and a resolution, not necessarily a happy ending, but one that holds out some hope for the survival of Earth and a meaningful future for humanity.”<sup>9</sup>

This passage stresses a key concept in plotting: the intimate connection between the character and the problem: “Success or failure should come about as the result of the efforts and/or the weaknesses of the characters, not merely random events.”

Sometimes the tension between the new and the old is almost touching, as in the requirements of one publisher of women’s fiction from some years ago: “We do not want old-fashioned, predictable, formulaic books. We are looking for contemporary characters and fresh, contemporary plots and story lines.”<sup>10</sup>

This same publisher then gave three pages of detailed guidelines that—if we hadn’t just been told the contrary—might look very much like old-fashioned, predictable formulas: “Every [romance] heroine should be an independent young woman with an interesting profession or career. She is equal to the stresses of today’s world and can take care of herself, yet she remains feminine and loyal to traditional values; when he comes along, the man she loves will take priority in her life, just as she will take priority in his. She is American, in her mid-twenties, and has never been married (no widows or divorcees, please!).”

The male leads in these stories were on a somewhat slacker leash: “...though it is preferable that they have never been married, they may be

widowed or divorced (but, of course, in the case of divorce, the ex-wife must be the party who was at fault).”

Of course. These novels were written for women, not men, and the denouement—a happy mating—would be placed in doubt if there were signs that the male lead had already wrecked one marriage.



It is no exaggeration to say that the entire fiction industry is set up to cope with the dilemma of familiarity and newness. Far more novels are published than have any hope of being successful, but both the failures and the successes give the publisher important feedback on the reader’s familiarity quotient.

The fiction industry has typical solutions to the problem of generating newness while not losing sight of the fundamental human fantasies. One of these is constantly to shift from one styling of a particular fantasy to another. This happens automatically when the publisher responds quickly and efficiently to reader interest, and you can see its manifestations most clearly by watching the shelves of genre fiction at your local bookstore.

Over a period of time, a given form of fiction will expand like the post-WWII map of the USSR, then suddenly lose its territorial ambitions and shrivel up into nothing. Fifteen years ago, in the bookstore I frequent, the westerns were down to one section of bookshelves—and most of these were reprints of classics—whereas fantasy and science fiction sprawled over nine sections and mystery over ten. (Fantasy and science fiction are often shelved together, apparently because they both deal with imaginary terrain. In fact their readers live in different fantasy worlds, and they are brought together only when they buy books.)

Readers differ in their habits. While some people have very specific tastes—a lady I knew read only historical romances—for others, newness is much more important than the appropriate fantasy. As a youngster, I gorged myself on science fiction until I grew sick of it. Years later, preparing a course in popular fiction, I found myself reading the same classic science-fiction authors I had read as a child—and loving them again. But as a youngster I also happily read westerns, fantasy, the Hardy

Boys, practically everything Conan Doyle ever wrote, and—in an isolated farmhouse devoid of other fine literature—the complete oeuvre of the Christian pulp artist Grace Livingston Hill.

Widespread shifts of attitudes regularly alter the landscape of genre fiction and contribute to the need for change. We see some of these in the current western. In any romantic form, like the western, it is convenient to have large aggregations of vicious, mindlessly brutal villains, since revenge is a key theme in such fiction. You want your villains available to die in large lots, the way the drug dealers do in the action drama. At one time the Indians filled this role in the western. But that was before the very term “Indian” became taboo. Taboos of this sort spread out energetically for a time, in response to waves of feeling, then disappear. You can argue with them if you like, thereby appealing to the people who think a particular taboo is silly (as Norman Mailer made a book out of anti-feminist sentiments), or you can accept them, embedding them in your story.

What you can’t do is be unaware of them. If you are unaware of them, you are apt to show the Indians scalping the whites, rather than the whites scalping the Native Americans. It is important to keep in mind that while the central fantasy of a genre is likely to remain the same, the form it takes may change radically. For example, Kevin Costner’s *Dances with Wolves* was generally—and correctly—viewed as a variation of the western, and not just because it is set in the western frontier. The hero is a self-isolating character who typically expresses himself physically rather than through articulation, as when, driven by pain, he tries to commit suicide early in the story—riding at the enemy troops—and inadvertently becomes a hero by rallying his own troops. Like all western heroes, he is up for some savage mistreatment just for being who and where he is. (In Chapter 11 we shall attempt to explain all that pain; for now, let us note simply that our hero gets frequent and vigorous thumpings in the course of the story.)

Costner even remained true to the cliché that has the western hero ride off into the distance at the end of the story. So all the important structural elements derive from traditional western pulp. What is new is that it is the cavalry, not the Indians, who are the villains. Stated thus, this may seem like a minor change, but on a scene-by-scene basis it results in

an enormous amount of newness. The audience sees different things. Negotiations take place inside a tipi instead of in an office; we follow the Sioux on a bison hunt, instead of the cavalry on a Sioux hunt. And, swept by a tide of emotion, we share the outrage of the Sioux when we see the bison killed—by evil white men—just for their hides and tongues. (We are not outraged on behalf of the bison, however; more of them will die in the next scene, at the hands of the Sioux. And since it's not clear that they prefer a death by bow-and-arrow to a death by bullet, it must be that what was really offensive in the last scene was wasting all that animal protein on ravens, coyotes, and wolves, and denying it to the Native Americans. As is common in such fiction, it is not killing per se that is offensive; it is badly motivated killing or killing engineered by the villains.)

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For the most part, we have so far looked at contrast and coherence as though they were static components of writing. The reality is very different: their relationship takes predictable dynamic forms. What we call “plot,” for example, is a kind of wrestling match between the two, but one with a referee who enforces not fairness but equality of strength, being aware that the real goal is the gratification of the spectators. If the contestants can only avoid defeating each other, then the trophy goes to—the audience. We shall look at the rules of engagement in the next chapters.



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1. Stevenson, vol. 13, 247.
2. Quoted in Hobbs, 71.
3. *Beyond Fantasy & Science Fiction*.
4. *Amazing Stories*. Some of these quotations were still available, word for word, a few years ago on the web-site of *Amazing Stories*.
5. *Aboriginal Science Fiction*.
6. *Women of Power*.
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## Chapter Nine

### The Sourdough Starter

Something old, something new,  
Something borrowed, something blue,  
And a lucky sixpence in her shoe.  
—Wedding rhyme

Let us imagine that we write a novel-length penny dreadful in which our hero, a detective, discovers in the first chapter that there is a conspiracy afoot to take the CEO of A. T. & T. hostage and demand an end to voice mail. Through brilliant detective work, the hero tracks down the villain, a deranged and messianic descendant of Alexander Graham Bell, who dies in the ensuing shoot-out. As he dies, he babbles about God and the phone company, and his last words are, “To speak directly with God, dial One.” This takes place in the second chapter.

How are we doing so far? Actually, we’re in a bit of a predicament. If we solve the story’s central problem, the story comes to an end. It is a violation of coherence simply to create another central problem: if we do that, we have another story.

So whatever else we do, we can’t allow the main problem to be solved until the end of the novel. Solving the main problem at the beginning is like spotting your opponents three outs before each inning of baseball: the game hasn’t even begun and it’s already over.

But if the hero can’t solve the main problem, then what do we do in the meantime? Because it also won’t do to show the hero engaged in one failed attempt after another to solve that problem. Watching this would be like watching the same person try again and again to climb the same greased flagpole. After he’d failed a few times we would detect a pattern and content ourselves with projecting the result of any future attempts. There simply is no drama here. Drama requires a contest of roughly equal forces. We like to watch fights, not beatings.

So coherence demands that the hero wrestle with one problem, not many, while contrast demands that he or she wrestle with many problems, not just one. What we need, clearly, is both something old and something new, the one for coherence, the other for contrast, much the way we raise a new loaf of sourdough bread from the same old starter we used for past loaves. How do we reconcile these two demands in a story?

We reconcile them with plot, a phenomenon that clearly is more in evidence the longer the story is. Short stories may not have plot; long stories usually do. But what is plot? Let us begin by asking someone in the know, someone who could actually write plots:

E. M. Forster, in his *Aspects of the Novel*, has the following to say about plot: “Let us define a plot. We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. ‘The king died and then the queen died,’ is a story. ‘The king died, and then the queen died of grief,’ is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. Or again: ‘The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king.’ This is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of high development.”<sup>1</sup>

Forster is clearly giving us a key element in plot, but if plot is simply a narrative with causation, then we remain baffled by why plotting is so difficult to learn or to talk about. Crafty editors have for generations taught writers plot by telling them when they *didn't* have a plot. It is easier to recognize plot, or its absence, than to describe or define it. This is like the difference between recognizing someone you know—which is easy—and telling someone who doesn't know that person how to spot him or her in a crowd. And we will find that we can take Forster's story-line in remarkable directions if all we require is causation: “Because the queen died, the prince became regent, which enraged his younger brother, the noted minimalist painter, who captured the prince and had him dipped in patriotic colors. A loyal army colonel, a friend of the prince's, then had the younger brother strip-searched, subjected to a demoralizing critique of his artistic technique, and banished from the kingdom. The colonel, while arranging his daughter's birthday party, was captured by a junta sympathetic to the banished artist. They tortured the colonel by making him listen for hours to a lecture entitled ‘The Point of Pointillism,’ read in



a drone by an assistant professor who didn't know how to operate Powerpoint. The C.I.A., goaded by Amnesty International and the National Endowment for the Arts, then arranged an invasion. The birthday party was ruined."

We certainly have story here, and we certainly have causation, so in Forster's terms this must be a plot of sorts, but I personally think it needs work. For one thing, it meanders fearfully, and the substance of it—the ruination of the birthday party—could be too trivial for a story that started out with kings and queens. If it seems as if I have taken liberties with Forster's example, I would argue that I have actually given a large amount of thematic unity to the story. For example, I put in the art-motif because the sheer pointlessness of the story irritated me, even though it fulfilled Forster's cause-effect criterion. And if the story is still incoherent, I maintain that it is Forster's definition that is to blame. Clearly what is lacking in this definition is something that forces coherence on the events of the story. If causation were one's only criterion, a story that began with a king and a queen could literally end up anywhere. But Forster has proved one thing of importance: it is far easier to describe its ingredients than to define plot.

If we really want to know about plot, we may have to study writers who *depend* on plot for their living. That leaves out the great stylists, for they have too many options at their disposal, too many ways of involving the reader. Unfortunately, the competent genre-writers, who invariably learn how to write plots, seldom if ever attempt a comprehensive theory of plot. They get caught up in details. Nonetheless, Erle Stanley Gardner, in the following example, gives us pretty much everything we need to understand how plot works:

One good rule is to get an attractive hero in the first sentence, get him into trouble in the first paragraph. Have a villain in the second paragraph. Then put in three pages getting the hero into a worse predicament. Have him grasp a solution which gets him out of the frying pan into the fire.<sup>2</sup>

Let us take careful note of the order of events here:

1. The hero gets into a predicament.
2. He tries to deal with the predicament.
3. His attempts to do so get him into a *worse* predicament.

The critical element here is that it is the character's own attempts to deal with his problem that make it worse. As Pauline Bloom says, in her essay "How to Achieve Story Structures," "Challenge [your characters] with strong conflicts that are worthy of them, and test them further by having their first few efforts to extricate themselves not only fail, but involve them even further with their difficulties."<sup>3</sup> We can find examples of this kind of plotting in every age of literature, but we will find that the problem is not always made worse, although that is usually the case. It is sufficient to say that the problem is altered by the character's reaction to it.

Let us consider an example from *Hamlet*: the hero learns that his uncle has killed his father. He responds to this by letting his uncle know that he, Hamlet, knows about the murder, whereupon the uncle makes an attempt on his life. This shows us something basic to one kind of plot: a character, in reacting to a problem or seeking to solve it, instead *reshapes* it. Now he still has the original problem, but it has taken a different form: coherence and contrast (dependent on newness) are both satisfied. And the reshaping process continues throughout the story, with each attempt to solve or respond to the problem, until finally the hero is allowed to solve the problem and end the story. Or, as in *Hamlet*, it is the problem that wins.

Plot must be thought of as a way of keeping the story fresh, a means of preventing narrative rancidness. It is the application of the Principle of Contrast to a story line that doggedly insists on being unified.<sup>A</sup> Insisting on unity alone, the writer ends with a story that lacks sufficient newness; insisting on diversity alone, he or she ends with lots of *unrelated* newness. Plot is our way of resolving this dilemma. In the alchemy of fiction, when unity and diversity are put into the same retort they turn into plot. In constructing a dinner, we may choose the courses so as to contrast one kind of taste with another. But if you ate a plotted meal, you would bite into the appetizer and it would be *transformed* into the Caesar salad. Another bite—mutton! You nibble at your mutton—and taste raspberry sherbet.

Why is this different from watching somebody try to climb a greased flagpole again and again? The crucial difference is that the problem

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A. But recall that "unity," in fiction, itself takes remarkably diverse forms.

responds to an attempt to solve it by fighting back, whereas the flagpole just stands there. To make them the same, we would have to let the flagpole create new strategies in response to each attempt to climb it. The first time, it greases itself—oh, don't ask me how—and the climber fails, but he goes away and fetches detergent, pitons, and a climbing harness, whereupon the flagpole trains the local pigeons in dive-bombing raids, and the climber makes friends with a bunch of cats, and the flagpole sends out for catnip...

Many different *events* are recounted, but the *issue* is always the same: will the climber make it up the flagpole? Thus, diversity and unity are both satisfied. The story must have something that is soluble and shapeable, namely a central problem, if we are to add a dollop of the solve/reshape method to it.

But not all “story” has both these qualities, any more than all the foods in your kitchen do: sugar does, meatloaf doesn't. So we learn little by asking a writer about the beginnings of a novel-length story. A writer may begin the process of creation by thinking up characters or events or problem—it doesn't seem to matter which comes first. But if the story is lengthy, it must be susceptible to repeated rejuvenation, which means it must have plot; and if it is to have plot, a feisty but malleable central problem has to make its way into it by the time it gets written. So a more interesting question would be, what were the story-ideas you rejected before you came up with a sufficiently plastic and dynamic material to make a plot out of?

Forster's definition put no boundaries at all on where the story could go. Ours plops down no-trespassing signs on every scrap of fictional turf that is outside the domain of our central problem. If we try any shenanigans with our story, as we did with Forster's, we quickly discover where the no-trespassing signs are. For example, using causation alone, we might have our climber fall off the flagpole and break his left arm, then drive himself to the hospital, except that when he reaches the turn-off to the hospital, he naturally can't operate the turn-signal, so he fails to signal, is run over by a school bus and placed in traction and uses the insurance money to invent and popularize a turn-signal operated by wagging the ears.

Our original flag-pole story had loads of action but a completely static central problem. This one has loads of cause-and-effect but no central problem at all. A working story, if it is to have plot, must have both a testy, muscular central problem, one that fights back, and one or more characters who address only that problem and such derivatives of it as do not lead the story away from the problem. If either problem or character is weak, then all is not lost: not yet. But then the writer had better have a style like a choir of archangels singing in harmony with the music of the spheres, and God conducting, because weakness in problem or character amounts to weakness in plot. And plot is what we use to revive the reader's interest when it slackens. This is why genre fiction always has husky problems and strong characters: the less brilliant the writing is, the stronger the plot must be.

The energy level of the characters is, on average, much higher in genre fiction than in mainstream fiction. In the action movie, it reaches preposterous levels. I once tried to count how many fictional lives were snuffed out in a Sylvester Stallone movie and eventually lost track because people were being killed in gross lots. It was like trying to calculate how many ants come to a bad end when they invade your kitchen and you dance the cha-cha-cha on their queue. High-energy characters create narrative turbulence in their vicinity; low-energy characters create stagnation. This becomes obvious if you imagine James Bond and Dr. No getting together, deciding that they can work things out, and coming to a compromise.



In any story there are three elements: persons, a situation, and the fact that in the end something has changed. If nothing has changed, it isn't a story.

—Malcolm Cowley<sup>4</sup>

The story of Proteus, in the *Odyssey*, would express the nature of plot perfectly if Menelaus and his men first overcame Proteus-as-lion by a particular maneuver, then, as he changed into a serpent, used another method to battle with him, and so forth. With each transformation, each side copes with a new problem, until finally the good guys win. It will be

seen that, if the relationship between hero and problem is to be successful, neither Menelaus nor Proteus can be sluggish. If Proteus stops struggling, Menelaus will become inert. This is why it is that, if your hero turns sluggish, you may have to investigate not his character but his environment. Beginning writers typically create far too few characters and sub-plots to keep an entire novel healthy. And once they catch on to this, they may create far too many for the story to remain uncluttered. When they finally learn how to plot a story well, they do this not by reason but by observing the work of other writers and obeying the promptings of their own minds. Your mind will flag both irrelevance and dullness, and you will finally be forced to learn how to plot just by avoiding these two evils.

The altering of a character—“character development”—has the same effect as plot. With plotting, you have the same problem made different; with character development, you have the same character made different. In other words, whatever other reasons we have for transforming characters in the course of a novel—and there clearly are other reasons—one reason is to renew the material presented to the reader. Rochester, in *Jane Eyre*, is “a changed man” at the end of the novel, which has the happy effect not only of bringing about a resolution but also of introducing newness. It is arguable, I think, that characters are more likely to be subject to change in novels with few characters than in novels with many, simply because when there are few characters, there are limited possibilities for creating contrast. If you alter a character, you add newness to him or her. And this may be why romantic fiction, which isolates characters, tends to show character development more than some other kinds of fiction. Certainly in genre fiction this is true.

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This kind of plotting—the solve/reshape method<sup>B</sup>—has serious

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B. The character is not always “solving” a “problem”; he or she may simply be reacting to a situation. The reaction then influences the situation. But in the interests of brevity I shall use the expression “solve/reshape” to designate this kind of plotting. In an excellent article in *Science Fiction Writer’s Market Place and Sourcebook*, Kristine Kathryn Rusch uses the terms “try/fail.” “The center of a story should usually have a try/fail cycle in which each attempt to solve the problem makes the problem worse.” (355) But the attempts do more than just fail: they actually alter the problem.

limitations related to coherence. When strong characters and problems interact within a framework of plausibility, they often squander huge amounts of space and time. But as we know, writers and critics have a powerful prejudice against stories that don't stay put. What to do? As we shall see, we use another type of plotting to solve this problem.

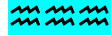


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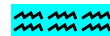


### Mark Twain, on spotting a plot



“Lately one of those curious things happened here which justify the felicitous extravagances of the stage and help us to accept them. A despondent man, bankrupt, friendless, and desperate, dropped a dose of strychnia into a bottle of whisky and went out in the dusk to find a handy place for his purpose, which was suicide. In a lonely spot he was stopped by a tramp, who said he would kill him if he didn't give up his money. Instead of jumping at the chance of getting himself killed and thus saving himself the impropriety and annoyance of suicide, he forgot all about his late project and attacked the tramp in a most sturdy and valiant fashion. He made a good fight, but failed to win. The night passed, the morning came, and he woke out of unconsciousness to find that he had been clubbed half to death and left to perish at his leisure. Then he reached for his bottle to add the finishing touch, but it was gone. He pulled himself together and went limping away, and presently came upon the tramp stretched out stone dead with the empty bottle beside him. He had drunk the whisky and committed suicide innocently. Now, while the man who had been cheated out of his suicide stood there bemoaning his hard luck and wondering how he might manage to raise money enough to buy some more whisky and poison, some people of the neighborhood came by and he told them about his curious adventure. They said that this tramp had been the scourge of the neighborhood and the dread of the constabulary. The inquest passed off quietly and to everybody's satisfaction, and then the people, to testify their gratitude to the hero of the occasion, put him on the police, on a good-enough salary, and he is all right now and is not meditating suicide any more. Here are all the elements of the naivest Arabian tale; a man who resists robbery when he hasn't anything to be robbed of, does the very best to save his life when he has come out purposely to throw it away; and finally is victorious in defeat, killing his adversary in an effectual and poetic fashion after being already hors de combat himself. Now if you let him rise in the service and marry the chief of police's daughter it has the requisite elements of the Oriental romance, lacking not a detail so far as I can see.”

—From *Marienbad*



## Chapter Ten

### How Plots Thicken

*Lord Illingworth:* The Book of Life begins with a man and a woman in a garden.

*Mrs. Allonby:* It ends with Revelations.

—Oscar Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, Act 1

Surely there is no other figure from the distant past who so dominates a subject as Aristotle does that of poetics—always excepting the founders of religions, who have an unfair advantage in that their truth, by definition immutable, comes directly from God. When I read the *Poetics*, I have the feeling that, if minds were storage compartments, Aristotle's would be a huge, efficiently run warehouse and mine would be a little file cabinet with squeaky drawers that don't shut all the way and have lost some of their labels. Aristotle understood what I have called the solve/reshape type of plot; this is what he refers to as *peripeteia*. Given time and opportunity, Aristotle might well have gone on to explain in detail why plot exists, what it does. We—his heirs and beneficiaries—*should* know all about this, but our intellectual information is compartmentalized; we don't share readily from one discipline to the other. Like the Russians under communism, our intellectual community produces better than it distributes. We seem to view disciplines the way a fisherman views bass plugs: if you were to dump them all into the same box, you'd never get them untangled again. The cognitive specialists know that human brains are so constituted that all perceptions, however vivid, become dull with exposure; and the novelist knows how to keep her readers from becoming bored; but even if they meet, they never learn that each can throw light on the other's fund of information.

The solve/reshape method of plotting does not always work all that well. For one thing, if you want to write a short story whose events extend over a great deal of time and space, it becomes difficult to crowd in these transformations of the action. It is like trying to squash three months'



worth of warm clothing into a flight bag for the winter tour of Antarctica. It takes a lot of space to show a character trying to solve a problem and shaping it into a different problem instead. Such a short story may turn into a novel during the planning stage.

Considered as a container for material, a story is somewhat more flexible than your flight bag, but there is still a limit to what you can pack into it. (Here we must note that the shorter a story is, the less it is in need of plot, since the function of plot is to restore the reader's interest when he or she gets bored. A story of only a few pages may be largely free of anything identifiable as plot.)

Storytellers learned very early that a story can be renewed simply by revealing to its audience a new interpretation of its events—what we might call “plot by revelation.” You don't have to reshape the *events* at all; you need only tell the audience to look at them differently. Instantly all the actions of a character look different if you simply tell the audience that he is a villain rather than a hero, or vice versa. Aristotle uses the term *anagnorisis*, or “recognition,” for this kind of plotting, and I would willingly follow him in this except that, if you are looking at recognition as a generic type of plotting, rather than as an aspect of drama, it is more useful to view it from the perspective of the author rather than from that of the character. The author reveals, the character recognizes. We must see it as a changed later form—to borrow a term from historical linguistics—of Aristotle's *anagnorisis* when Oskar, the narrator of Günter Grass's *Die Blechtrommel* (*The Tin Drum*), sometimes lies to the reader, then reveals that he has lied. Or when the narrator of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* gives new versions of old stories, always with more detail. Or when the narrator of *The Princess Bride* marries the heroine to the villain, only to have the whole episode turn out to be a dream. Or when Gollum, in *Lord of the Rings*, changes back and forth from enemy to helper to enemy again.

The ultimate objective of this kind of plotting is the same as that of the solve/reshape kind of plot: to cope with the reader's demand that characters and events remain the same while somehow changing constantly and completely in the interests of renewed vividness.

But if the objective of this kind of plotting is the same, its problems and limitations are very different. For example, if the author reveals a character to be villain rather than hero, all the character's past actions have

to be consistent with villainy rather than heroism, and if they aren't, the reader is apt to flip back through the program of events and notice a discrepancy.

Let us illustrate: imagine that we have two detectives, Smith and Jones. Smith is involved in tracking down an archfiend, the mysterious Dr. When, who has been sabotaging the clock at city hall and making it run late. Jones, a chronic over-sleeper who has trouble getting to work on time, is a colleague and friend of Smith's. Jones always has time to listen to Smith's theories about the case. You can both renew Jones as a character and maintain coherence by revealing that he is actually Dr. When himself.<sup>A</sup> Then, when the reader thinks back on Jones's friendship with Smith, he realizes that Jones wasn't just being a sympathetic ear for Smith at all, he was actually trying to find out what Smith knew about Dr. When—i.e., Jones. The reader remembers now that Jones always had a keen interest in when the clock repairman was due in. And Jones's motivation makes sense now: he was moving the clock back so as to get to work on time. That is, just as all the Jones-related events had to make sense in the original version, in which Jones was a good guy, now these same events have to make another kind of sense entirely.

If you use this kind of plot, the action of the story doesn't have to move around at all in time and place, because it is not *action* that is regenerating the events, it is *revelation*. Conversely, if you begin with the stipulation that the story be limited to one time and one place, then you are stuck with this type of plot. Looked at one way, this kind of plotting gives you a terrific efficiency, since you can compress the events of decades into minutes. Such plotting depends, of course, on the characters trying to keep secrets, and on those secrets ultimately being revealed, which is why it is best adapted for stories that are *about* the keeping of secrets, and the way they get out anyway, such as Ibsen's *Ghosts* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. In *Ghosts*, Alving starts out as a great man and ends up as a scoundrel, while Regina starts out as the servant girl and ends up as Alving's illegitimate daughter. At the end of the play, a couple hours after it began, you have all the same people you started with, which is

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A. The seasoned reader of mysteries would have long since become suspicious of Jones merely because he hangs around inconspicuously.

consistent with our notions of coherence, yet nothing is the same. Thus coherence and newness, at heart mortal enemies, are obliged to cohabit in the story, with a kind of uneasy truce.

The largest class of stories with this kind of plotting is all those classical dramas that were constrained to use it because their authors had to abide by the unities of time and place. The unities force plotting by revelation because it's difficult, if not impossible, to squeeze a complicated series of events into the real-time duration of the play. A story like *Ghosts* would be unthinkable without plotting by revelation: Alving would have to go through his whole dastardly career and father children who would have to grow up—in a single evening.

It must not be imagined that the two types of plotting exclude each other, the way turning on the heat in your living room might be thought incompatible with turning on the air conditioner. They are more like a cabinetmaker using both mortising chisels and paring chisels while building a dresser. *Oedipus Rex*, with events that occur in two countries and over an entire lifetime, relies heavily on revelation, but Sophocles uses the solve/reshape type of plotting as well. It is revealed to us that Oedipus leaves his home to avoid killing his parents, not realizing that he is leaving the home of his foster parents and traveling to where his real parents live. But his doing that is an example of a character trying to solve a problem and only shaping it instead.

The author's need for both types of plotting can best be demonstrated with an example. Imagine a novice at plotting—we shall call him de Mauvais—who writes a drama in which a drifter murders someone, suspicion falls on an innocent man, and a detective solves the crime. Nothing very challenging or unusual there. But young de Mauvais has learned only the solve/reshape type of plotting. He creates his characters, motivates his villain, and shows the murder. But he is uneasy, for he has the feeling you have in one of those dreams where you're trying to get somewhere in a hurry but can run only in slow motion. He has already used up a large portion of his two hours, yet in the remaining time he must not only cause the murder to be discovered, solved, and avenged but must also oblige the murderer either to remain at the scene of the crime or be brought back there quickly.

De Mauvais tries to explain this to his villain, an imaginary but nonetheless forceful figure, and the villain says, “Oh, sure. Give me one good reason why I should hang around there or go back.” “How about if we make you the butler of the murdered man? Then you could stay there and maybe no one would notice you.” The villain rolls his eyes: “It’s been done.”

De Mauvais begins to realize why fiction is so full of clichés, which are simply elegant solutions to awkward problems. The author views them the way you view your favorite pair of shoes: too scuffed to wear to a dinner party, but nothing else fits so well. In his dramatic effort, de Mauvais also discovers the importance of keeping the audience’s attention alive not just during the good parts but during the entire play. Losing their attention is like losing the power to your aquarium: if your angelfish die from lack of oxygen, you can’t bring them back to life later just by turning on an extra air pump. So de Mauvais has to throw in a few complications and a sub-plot or two, to bridge the dull places in the main story, and if he does all this without *anagnorisis*—revelation—his story becomes either hopelessly long or wildly implausible.

If de Mauvais had learned *only* plotting by revelation, he would have no difficulty getting the murder, complete with motivation, into his story in double-time. But his story would again be drastically shaped by the distinctive type of plotting. His characters could be active only in the past, not in the present. They would all be keeping secrets and lying. Creating a long story with only plot-by-revelation is like whittling a screen door out of a piece of oak: it’s not that you can’t do it, it’s just that it’s a lot of work and the result may end up looking funny. Eugene O’Neill’s *Hughie*, a virtuoso piece if ever there was one, comes close. It is a one-act play with two characters, only one of whom speaks, and neither does much of anything. If you decide to do something similar, the key thing to remember is that O’Neill kept it short.



A writer is someone who can make a riddle out of an answer.

—Karl Kraus<sup>1</sup>

I have said that plot-by-revelation tends to create stories about secrets, such as *Oedipus Rex*. It is a type of plot better designed for the modern mystery (where the issue is “who did it?”) than for the suspense novel (where the issue is “will they get away with it?”). Its freedom from time and space have led to distinctive motifs, notably the practice—common in the mystery, unknown in real life—of letting the detective gather all the principals together in somebody’s living room at the end of the novel so that he can reveal the murderer to the other suspects and to the reader. This is such an implausible motif that writers have often tried to make sense of it by incorporating a deception designed to make the murderer reveal himself.

Like all successful motifs, this one was heavily overused and rapidly became a cliché. The motif may be said to have peaked as early as 1934, in Agatha Christie’s *Murder in the Calais Coach* (later reissued as *Murder on the Orient Express*), where Poirot gathered all the principals into the dining car of the train and revealed that the murderer was—everyone! And that the murder was actually a good thing!

The Greeks used plot-by-revelation heavily, as did, naturally, everyone who tried to imitate the Greeks. But the Greeks had little choice in the matter. If you have stories that are taken for non-fiction, the events of which wander all over space and time like my attention when I try to read Hegel, then you use plot-by-revelation because it is the simplest way to manage space and time efficiently.<sup>B</sup> Thus in the earliest surviving Greek play (when the dramatic tradition consisted of a chorus and a leader or two singing a story antiphonally), Aeschylus binds Prometheus to a mountain in Scene One, then finds motives for one wanderer after another—Oceanus, Io, and Hermes—to visit him and bring up all the cosmic events and issues of the story. Modern dramatists, writing fiction, have more choices of how to plot, because they can adjust the facts to fit the story.



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B. Here again it is important to realize that unity of time is a real source of coherence; it is just damnably inconvenient. We’ve invented a variety of ways of adapting to its demands—for example, giving the story a coherent movement *through* time, as in the movie *History of the World, Part I*.

*Oedipus [to Teiresias]: You'd rob us of this your gift  
of prophecy?*

—Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, line 323

Revelation, as a plotting device, takes many forms, and these forms are shaped by our mind's insistence that coincidence—at least as a solution for narrative problems—is anathema, for it suffers the curse of meaninglessness.<sup>C</sup> We saw this in our discussion of James Bond and his wondrous little weapons that get him out of even the stickiest jam, which have to be shown to the reader well before they are put to use. It will not do to put Bond in a spot, then let him discover a gun or grenade or smoke bomb that someone has left carelessly about. But what if the storyteller is obliged to or wishes to tell an implausible story, one that *depends* on coincidence? (*Oedipus Rex* comes to mind here.) Then he or she relies on the audience's willingness to swallow anything that is properly prepared and garnished. The classic—and classical—solution here is to tell the audience in advance that a coincidence will occur. This may be done with an oracle or other prophecy. Once it has been predicted, the coincidence comes across as a spooky fulfillment, rather than a lame plotting device. This may be seen as a type of plotting-by-revelation. But although functionally this phenomenon is kissing kin to our insistence that James Bond's rescue be prepared in advance, it demands a price for its cooperation. That price is a favorable environment. In, say, the modern detective story, the oracle would be as out of place as a superhero in a novel of manners. Or just imagine putting an oracle into the latest James Bond movie. The oracle thrives in an environment of spooky seriousness; it does not coexist well with puns and irreverence and too much rationality.

Belief in oracles is not a prerequisite for the use of oracles; they may be used where author and reader alike are skeptics in the matter of predicting the future. This may have something to do with the oracle's favored environment—one that excludes rationality and light in favor of

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C. Coincidence can, however, be used to *create* the plot complication. Nancy Kress, in "Plot: Using Coincidence in Your Fiction," gives an excellent analysis of when coincidence can and can't be used (Tompkins, 30-33).

mystery and shadow—and may also result merely from our ability to accommodate to any literary tradition that has been around for a while.

But if a suitable environment can be provided for them, oracles solve a multitude of problems.

Imagine that you wish to tell a story in which a man sails around the world looking for a particular sperm whale. The thought occurs to you—as it would to your reader—that there are heavy odds against your character’s tracking the whale down on the trackless seas. Images of especially tiny needles and remarkably large haystacks come to mind. You can increase the odds a bit by painting the whale white, so that it is distinctive. Melville implies that this is why Moby Dick is white when, in Chapter XLIV, he says, “seems it not a mad idea...that in the broad boundless ocean, one solitary whale, even if encountered, should be thought capable of individual recognition from his hunter...? [Not really, because]...the peculiar snow-white brow of Moby Dick, and his snow-white hump, could not but be unmistakable.”<sup>2</sup> This same chapter argues that sperm whales travel more or less regular routes.

But finally it is chancy to rely on a naturalistic rationale to account for Captain Ahab’s being able to find Moby Dick on any sort of plausible time schedule. The time-honored solution is to announce in advance that the coincidence has to happen, which is surely why Melville puts the old sailor, Elijah, into chapter XIX of *Moby-Dick*. In the Old Testament, it was Elijah the Tishbite who foretold the Biblical Ahab’s destruction. Melville’s Elijah hints rather strongly that this Ahab’s fate will not be a happy one either. Even earlier, “the old squaw Tistig” had predicted that Ahab’s name would prove prophetic. It would take a long and dreary narrative to cite every portent and prophecy in *Moby-Dick*, and I do not mean to suggest that they occur only to take the edge off the coincidence on which the story depends. But that is certainly one of their major functions. I suspect there would be few readers—and they would surely be out of *their* element—who at the climax of *Moby-Dick* would stop to carp about coincidence.

The oracle raises problems of its own. By using predictions to account for coincidence, the writer risks giving away key elements of the plot, thereby losing his or her grip on the reader’s curiosity. Here again there is a traditional solution, which is to make the prediction ambiguous

or somehow not understandable. We see the non-understandable prediction at the beginning of Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, where we are told early on—oracles usually occur early in a story—"of an ancient prophecy, which was said to have pronounced, that the castle and lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it."<sup>3</sup> Far from revealing the plot, a prediction used thus serves to arouse the reader's curiosity. Indeed, such an oracle may appear to predict the opposite of what actually happens, as when Macbeth is comforted by the prediction that

Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until  
Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill  
Shall come against him. (*Macbeth*, IV. i)

Here the prediction does not defuse a coincidence at all: instead, it intensifies Macbeth's peril by giving him false comfort. And for the audience it provides a moment of irony when it proves to be a forecast of Macbeth's doom rather than a proof that he is safe.

Sometimes the prediction is straightforward but the facts are ambiguous. We see this in *Oedipus Rex*, where Oedipus knows that he is fated to kill his parents but isn't given the information that his parents are not who he thinks they are.<sup>D</sup> The audience's attention is held not by the question of whether he will kill his parents—literary oracles never lie, and the audience knew the story anyway—but by the question, when will Oedipus realize what has happened, and how will he react?<sup>E</sup>

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D. We associate the ambiguous prediction with the Delphic oracle, but as Joseph Fontenrose has demonstrated, there simply is no evidence to support this. Overwhelmingly, the actual predictions of the Delphic oracle appear to have been fairly prosaic. Our skewed notions of the Delphic oracle appear to result from the fact that the ambiguous oracle is memorable, the ordinary one not.

E. Aristophanes even has Euripides accuse Aeschylus, in *The Frogs*, of deliberately using "When?" instead of "What?" for cheap suspense, saying,

He'd start with one veiled bundled muffled character plunked down in place,  
Achilles, like, or Niobe, but nobody could see its face.

It looked like drama, sure, but not one syllable would it mutter...

Phony effects! The audience sat and watched the panorama

Breathlessly. 'When will Niobe speak?' And that was half the drama.

(lines 911-13, 919-20, Lattimore translation)



The non-understandable prediction can be used in the same way—to set apart the information provided to the audience and that provided to the characters. Then there is a sharp contrast between how the character views his situation and how the audience does. Aeschylus provides a wonderful example of this in *The Agamemnon*, when the captured Trojan princess Cassandra (cursed by an angry Apollo to prophesy correctly without being believed) is brought back to Mycenae as a concubine by King Agamemnon. Refusing to leave the chariot on which they have entered, she is left alone onstage by the exasperated queen, whereupon she begins to prophesy everyone’s doom, including her own—but in lyric meters reserved for choral entr’actes, not in the hexameters conventional for the scene she is in. The chorus of citizens is utterly baffled, repeatedly wondering in pedestrian hexameters what Cassandra is waxing so lyrical about, when all she needs to do is climb down and accept her slavery. (Of course, in delicious irony, the original *audience* knew the myth well and understood every prophetic word of Cassandra’s apparent ravings to be absolutely true.) Finally the chorus, too, is swept up into lyric meter—whereupon Cassandra switches into hexameters, saying in effect, “Now I’ll tell you in plain Greek what I’m trying to say.” She does—and they, of course, comprehend not a word because of Apollo’s curse.<sup>4</sup> The opposition of the meters becomes an objective correlative—to use T. S. Eliot’s term—for the lack of communication.<sup>F</sup> And if we imagine the story without Cassandra’s predictions, we lose the pins-and-needles effect that these have on the audience as they realize that Cassandra is speaking the truth but only they can understand her.<sup>G</sup>

While oracles certainly have this function of defusing the arbitrariness of coincidence and the supernatural, this is not the same thing as saying that they have only this purpose. In his book *Multimind*, Robert

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F. One wonders if Eliot ever noticed that the term “objective correlative” is precisely the kind of abstraction for which authors create objective correlatives. The term cries out to be incorporated in a symbol denoting concreteness.

G. If one views the Trojan War as a historical event, and the mythology about it as a revising of that event by many generations of storytellers who have squeezed it through the biases of human cognition, Cassandra’s inability to communicate may have once made a different kind of sense: she is after all a foreigner and doesn’t speak the language of her captors.

Ornstein has observed that our minds have a bias for simple distinctions: either this is true or that is true. But in fact there may be many reasons for the same phenomenon. You might own a flock of chickens because someone gave them to you, because you need the eggs, or because you are involved in research to determine whether a Rhode Island Red is as smart as a dirt clod—or for all these reasons at once. Similarly, it seems likely that oracles have other advantages, disadvantages, and life-support systems than those I have discussed. Moreover, the writer of fiction may not see his or her writing in terms of function at all. The need to make choices does not imply an understanding of the choices one makes. At most you can say that competent writers tend to make the same choices in the same circumstances, just as two businessmen might independently veer away from a couple of rough-looking fellows trying on ski masks, instead of stopping to ask them directions to the night depository.

Also, two writers might use very different means to reach the same outcome. A writer could create an oracle to defuse the arbitrariness of an unlikely or coincidental ending, then feel obliged to create a style that matches the spookiness of the oracle. Another writer might start out with the idea of writing a spooky story, then incorporate an oracle into it because he or she has seen this done before. The issue of appropriateness does not even come up when a writer has made the right choices, which is why, in an ideal world, all teachers of literature would be obliged to work as readers in the fiction industry for a year or two, so as to learn from bad writers why good writers make the choices they do. Bad fiction is more instructive than good fiction, just as bad financial decisions teach you more than good ones, and with a wondrous impact.

Ivy Compton-Burnett expressed the view that, “As regards plot, I find real life no help at all. Real life seems to have no plots. And as I think a plot desirable and almost necessary, I have this extra grudge against life.”<sup>5</sup> It may be true that real life has few *complete* plots, because life is too complex for anything that organized and coherent. But the phenomenon of plot is certainly not limited to fiction. When newspaper reporters say that a story “has legs,” they are acknowledging the presence of plot.

In early 2009, for example, there were numerous stories of attacks by pirates on container-ships off the east coast of Africa. Most of these were

dropped quietly from the news once a ship was captured, simply because the initial drama had played out. But then the pirates captured an American-flagged ship and the level of drama not only went up but was refreshed on a day-by-day basis. The previous pirate-stories had been simple and unfulfilling: a successful attack was followed eventually by the payment of ransom. But this time we learned that the crew, unarmed, had fought off their attackers and even captured them. Our interest rose: as noted, we like to watch fights, not beatings. But then this version turned out to be largely wrong, and the story appeared to be, so to speak, on its last legs, when the pirates, holding the captain of the American ship hostage, ran out of fuel for their lifeboat and were dead in the water in the presence of an American warship. But this meant that the story, too, was dead in the water.

At this point there was a rescue—not of the hostage but of the story. This was because it was reported that the pirates, in contact with their fellow-pirates, had arranged for various other captured ships to set off toward the scene of the drama. What would happen when they arrived?

Instead of the expectable payment of the ransom (olds, not news), the plot continued to evolve. Before back-up could reach them, the kidnappers allowed their boat to be towed by a navy vessel, the hostage broke free, and sharpshooters fired on all the kidnappers but one who was on the navy vessel. There the three kidnappers, like the story itself, came to a sudden end.

It should be noted that much of the drama turned out to be based on misinformation. In other words, this seemingly simple news-story used both standard methods of plotting to remain interesting. The attempts to solve the problem merely shaped it, and periodic revelations turned the events on their heads, restoring their interest for the news-hungry public.

Similarly, the Rodney King case, in Los Angeles, was revived by the riot that followed the acquittal of the policemen who beat King. The original event—a drunk-driving arrest—would not have made the back pages of the *Times*, but to the delight of the reporters, and the dismay of everyone else, the story acquired “legs” and ran all over the tabloids for years on end. You’re seeing a version of *anagnorisis* whenever you pick up your newspaper and discover that a new revelation has transformed a

story previously in the news, as in the following headline: “Convicted Killer Absolved by DNA!”

Once again: in story-telling, plot serves to renew the events of the story. But using plot is more difficult than it might seem, because the author can never have quite the same perception of the story as the reader, who is unfamiliar with it. Their boredom quotient can never be the same, just as someone who works at McDonald’s might be less thrilled by a hamburger than a child taken there for the first time. Similarly, because of their different amounts of experience, Ms. Critic and Mr. Average Reader might not react the same to a work of fiction, even if they had the same taste. Therefore, the author can only guess and calculate when it is necessary to renew the events of the story.

One might suppose the author would want to err on the side of more plot rather than less, since plot restores vividness, but in actuality neither choice is good. Too little plot allows boredom, but too much reduces coherence, putting the audience into an environment in which nothing is stable, nothing can be depended on. The movie *Chinatown*, which is heavy in plot-by-revelation, is somewhat affected by this disease. At the end, you suspect that if the movie went on for another ten minutes, all the characters would switch roles again from victim to victimizer, from good guy to bad guy. And the end of Neil Simon’s *Murder by Death*, even if it is a spoof, should truly be put in quarantine for its revelatory palpitations.

This problem is always most serious with mysteries based on a simple either/or issue, as when a character is either the victim or the villain. With few possibilities for renewal-by-revelation, the author may shift the character from likely victim to likely villain so often that the readers cannot help noticing that they are being manipulated. There are a number of modern movies with this problem, in which a detective has an affair with the putative victim of a crime.

So author and reader can never experience the author’s material in the same way, since they have different degrees of familiarity with it. Indeed, we all discount our own information to some extent, simply because it is known and old rather than unknown and new. Years ago, in a writing class, one of my students complained about having nothing interesting to write about.

“Where do you work?” I asked.

“Universal Studios.”

“When you go to work, what are the things you see?”

“Well, outside my window, there’s a line of people dressed up in weird costumes. They’re waiting to get into *Let’s Make a Deal*. One person might be dressed as a carrot, another as a carriage bolt or a toaster.”

It will be seen that this student’s problem was not a lack of material at all: the problem was that the material—however striking—had suffered a fatal diminution of newness over time, so that it seemed quite ordinary to see an immense carrot standing in line and chatting with a toaster.



You go to bed every night thinking that you’ve written the most brilliant passage ever done which somehow the next day you realize is sheer drivel.

—Tom Wolfe<sup>6</sup>

Always when I’m in the middle of a new book I think it’s rubbish.

—Mary Stewart<sup>7</sup>

Fear ringed by doubt is my eternal moon.

—Malcolm Lowry<sup>8</sup>

The phenomenon of familiarity can be devastating to writers who expect to thrill to every word of their own composition. In fact, their own material must seem boring unless they capture it in language within moments of acquiring it. And since this seldom happens, writers learn to ignore their own judgments of their work. In a radio interview, John McPhee said that he had never written a book that hadn’t seemed dull to him at some point in its composition. But if even McPhee’s writing can appear dull to its author, then most of us must learn to live with our own writing appearing stupifyingly tiresome to the tenth power.

And finally, we must acknowledge the modern notion that plot is passé, that the new novel will be without plot. I shall make a counter-prediction: there will never be a time when writers, telling a long story,

fail to see the advantages of renewing their characters and events from time to time. And when they do that, they are making use of plot.



#### References:

1. Quoted in Hobbs, 2.
2. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 271.
3. Walpole, 27.
4. This interpretation owes its origin to observations by Richmond Lattimore in a class at Bryn Mawr.
5. Ivy Compton-Burnett, quoted in Allott, 249.
6. Quoted in Hobbs, 98.
7. Quoted in Hobbs, 97.
8. Quoted in Hobbs, 94.

## Chapter Eleven

### Frankenstein Meets—Hardly Anybody

*Figaro*: Sir, when I was found by bandits, I was wearing gold ornaments, lace baby clothes and embroidered wrappings. And if that isn't enough to prove my birth, consider the care they took to demonstrate I was someone's precious son by giving me these distinguishing marks. Here, this design on my arm...

*Marceline*: On your right arm, in the shape of a spatula?

*Figaro*: How do you know that's what it is?

*Marceline*: My God! It's him!

—Beaumarchais, *The Marriage of Figaro*, III. 16

It is easier to create a great deal of contrast if you start with an abundance of characters, all sharply distinguished one from the other. But this implies a setting teeming with people, and with a variety of people at that. That means that it is simplest to set a story in a hotel (Vicki Baum's *Grand Hotel*) or a school (J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series) or a police department (many of Joseph Wambaugh's books) or a large family (Frank Galbraith and Ernestine Carey's *Cheaper by the Dozen*) or a bustling medieval abbey (Ellis Peters' chronicles of Brother Cadfael) or an army base (Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*). We cannot easily have all those contrastive people if we isolate our main character in a remote cabin in Alaska.

The alert reader may note that large numbers of characters, by creating diversity, must therefore injure coherence, but writers have ways of getting around this problem. For one thing, you can cause one bunch of characters to live out a fate that has an ironic connection with the fate of another bunch of characters. That way the reader's interest is refreshed every time the second group of characters comes into the story, while, to maintain coherence, the behavior and attitudes of the second group are given some relation to the behavior and attitudes of the first group. In eighteenth-century drama, it was common to have not one but two

versions of the central love story, the one between the principals, who were of the nobility, the other between the servants of the principals: Figaro and Susanna serve the Count and Countess. The two story lines run in parallel, but the one is a rollicking polka, the other a stately minuet. That way contrast and coherence are both satisfied. In general, contrast was generated by the alternation between the serious behavior and lofty sentiments of the noble characters and the crude behavior and earthy sentiments of the servants. But both master and servant might be moving toward the same goal—marriage—and the progress of the servant might be an ironic version of the progress of the master. Moreover, the servant would typically be making attempts to solve the master’s problem, and these attempts, as always, would only alter that problem in interesting ways.

There are many variations on the eighteenth-century model. Plotting relied heavily on revelation not just to renew characters and incidents but also to solve the main problem of the story. The objective is to put the character through some troubles but finally give him both lover and position. We can create a seemingly insurmountable problem simply by putting the main character into the wrong social class, as Fielding does Tom Jones, then, at the end, reveal that he was actually all along a member of the *right* social class. Voilà: in a moment his status-deficiency is resolved, his beloved’s father ends all resistance to the marriage, and the novel can come to a close. This was such a valuable technique that it generated one of the hoariest clichés of literature: the discovery of a birthmark that reveals identity. As usual, the cliché is really an elegant solution: the alternative to the birthmark—a visible, tangible symbol of social status—is an abstract statement of relationships. “He’s really the son of the Count” simply doesn’t compare in vividness to “Wow, check out the scarlet pimpernel on his butt!”<sup>A</sup>

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A. This leads to a wonderful comic scene in *The Court Jester*, where Danny Kaye’s character has to repeatedly lower a diaper to show off proof of royalty, the scarlet pimpernel. This motif too has ancient antecedents, notably the famous scene in the *Odyssey* in which the aged nurse Eurykleia recognizes the long-lost Odysseus by the scar on his leg. And the foundling Ion (in Euripides’ play *Ion*) is finally recognized by the design on his carefully preserved baby-blanket.



Beaumarchais was already doing a parody of the birthmark cliché in 1784, when the servant Figaro is saved from marrying the woman he doesn't love because she turns out to be his mother, even if not upper class.

The dual-class model is a highly refined solution to the problems of contrast, coherence, and human interest, which last appears to depend on some basic human fantasy being fulfilled in the story. But just when the writers finally got the story right, the motif went into decline. For this model, like all clichés, brings about sensory-satiation when the reader encounters it too often: then everyone knows that Tom Jones must needs turn out to be the child of a properly high-born mother. It's easy to imagine a book reviewer, late in the eighteenth century, writing something like the following: "I will be revealing nothing the reader doesn't already know when I say that *of course* the hero turns out to be of noble birth. One longs for a story of this sort in which a high-born hero turns out to be the son of a retarded innkeeper and a loony charwoman."

This does not mean that this particular plot-by-revelation cannot be used any more. On the contrary: like all clichés, it is too valuable to be discarded. W. J. Locke used it in *The Beloved Vagabond* (1906), as did E. M. Hull in *The Sheik* (1921). And it can always be used either ironically or in a reversed version, so that the high-born hero discovers that he is actually the child of the scullery maid and thus eligible to marry the chambermaid. In *Arsenic and Old Lace*, Mortimer Brewster discovers that his blood-relatives are wacko serial killers and decides that he must forego marriage, but his dilemma is solved when he learns that he is actually illegitimate. "Elaine! Did you hear—do you understand? I'm a bastard!"<sup>1</sup>

Profitable literary ploys do not simply disappear: they suffer variations. Jane Austen used a modified version of the eighteenth-century model with middle-class characters. This might not seem much of a change at the schematic level, but in the details of the story it is actually a huge change—much like writing a western from the viewpoint of the Indians.

The romantics took storytelling in an extraordinarily difficult and hugely profitable direction. The eighteenth century assumed that the greatest good for a social being was to be incorporated into society, preferably with as much status and wealth as possible. So main characters

typically moved from disrupted status to secure status, or from neediness to wealth. A tragedy might move them inexorably from a favorable to an unfavorable status. When character and problem fight it out, sometimes the problem wins.

The romantic novel, on the other hand, changes the focus from the individual within society to the individual estranged from society. The local terrain becomes vastly different: we move from the salon, filled with talkative people, to the wide expanses of the isolated ego. Goethe's Werther communicates through letters and has his great scenes out of doors. In common parlance, "romantic" has something to do with love, but if we have in mind the romantic age or the romantic style of writing—which is still with us in various genre forms, notably the western, the action novel or movie, and fantasy—then it is helpful to see that love is really a byproduct of the romantic fantasy, not its essence. The proof of this is that you can have romantic stories devoid of a love motif (this is true of many of the "action" movies such as those featuring Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger, and these are romantic to the core).<sup>B</sup> And in any case, love as a subject for storytelling was not discovered by the romantics.

The essence of the romantic seems actually to be the isolation of a character and the styling of that isolation as grand and tragic and inevitable rather than merely regrettable. Love is important, but only because it is typically presented as a *solution* to the character's isolation. To view love as the essence of the romantic is a bit like seeing welfare as the whole point of poverty rather than as an attempt to deal with it. When the disease is isolation, the cure is love.

And as always, a major change in focus implies a whole parcel of minor changes. The romantics couldn't use the old characters: those people were far too sane and healthy, even if the public hadn't tired of them. The romantics needed outcasts and egotists (negative styling) or people too grand for their circumstances (positive styling). Such characters, in return for being branded with the mark of Cain—often a

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B. On balance, women's genre fiction puts love more in the forefront, while men's puts revenge there (which leads one to wonder if women read fiction before marriage, men after).

physical mark, like the “slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish”<sup>2</sup> down the side of Captain Ahab’s face and neck—, were granted special qualities, even genius.

Prometheus, who squandered knowledge and was punished by Zeus himself, became their mythological hero: the sub-title of *Frankenstein* is *The Modern Prometheus*. Characters in eighteenth-century fiction might commit an offense against society, but the romantics offended against God. When Captain Ahab says that he would strike the sun if it offended him, we fear for the sun and hope that it behaves itself. And only a romantic would not think it odd that someone would try to exact revenge upon a whale for defending itself against an attempt to render it into lamp oil.

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Romanticism shows human fantasy gone into hyperdrive. Everything turns cosmic on the romantics, so that if a character cannot have it all, he won’t have any of it—Lucifer will be either Ruler of Heaven or Ruler of Hell, but he won’t consider becoming, say, the *éminence grise* of the Deity, even if the position is open.

Human fantasy, in fact, is allowed to have its way with reality in most forms of fiction, and this often creates dilemmas. In the detective novel, the reader prefers a powerful hero, yet it is easier to create drama if he is shoehorned into a police department, surrounded by contrastive characters, than if he is on his own. But that means that he has superiors. So he is not so powerful after all, unless the writer makes him the head cop, as was done in *Hawaii 5-0* with Jack Lord’s character, Steve McGarrett. But if McGarrett is to be active within the story, he has to go around arresting people—not the function of the head of a police department. This is like having the attorney general crawling through windows at drug busts.

Similarly, *Star Trek* focused on high-status characters who, in a realistic world, would have little freedom to act. But since commanding officers who behaved like commanding officers would make for boring television, the writers simply allowed these characters to go exploring, constantly leaving their duties on the Starship Enterprise as they merrily went about getting kidnapped, lost, beaten up, or whatever the plot of the week required. Any captain of a ship or commander of an army who

behaved like Captain Kirk would be stripped of his command. General McChrystal, after all, didn't wander around getting into adventures on the battlefield in Afghanistan. But the series would not have worked otherwise. Orson Scott Card pointed out that focusing the series on a commanding officer was such a bad mistake that the show never allowed Kirk to *behave* like one.<sup>3</sup>

The willfulness we see in Captain Ahab is typical in romantic fiction. And great willfulness implies immense eruptions of anger and revenge when the will is thwarted. Revenge, in fact, in especially spectacular forms, is endemic to romantic fiction, and it causes special problems of its own. For you cannot allow horribly painful forms of revenge unless they are motivated by equally horrible offenses. And this is why, in romantic fiction, the hero is so often tortured by the villain.

An example: in Ian Fleming's *Thunderball*, at a health resort, a peeved villain finds Bond strapped to a Hercules Motorized Traction Table and turns up the RPMs. Bond is rescued in time, and before long he finds the villain in a sweat box and turns up the heat.<sup>4</sup> Romantics love to see the villain undergoing pain, for he stands for all the people who have thwarted their stubborn wills. But he has to deserve the pain, and that is why Bond has to be hurt first. And if the villain typically gets a bit more than he gives, he deserves it for striking the first blow. The villain in romantic melodramas cannot be run over by a freight train or dashed into the ocean from a high cliff if he has merely raised the rent a few dollars on Penelope's efficiency apartment.

Romantic fiction turns everything cosmic; it has a taste for the ultimate. The issues are good and evil, not "better or worse," as in our marriage ceremony, and it is no accident that the narrator of *Frankenstein* writes letters from Archangel instead of from Minsk, Pinsk, or Omsk. Love is the ultimate good, and romantic love is a no-holds-barred version of conventional love. Therefore, we cannot be surprised to find that betrayal is an especially vigorous motif in romantic fiction: where love is the ultimate good, betrayal is the ultimate evil—a view not only the romantics have come to. In Canto XXXIV of Dante's *Inferno*, Dante and Vergil finally reach the very bottom of Hell to find a group of traitors in an icy land—Dante sees betrayal as the coldest of all sins—and in their center is Satan himself, the arch-betrayer, imbedded in the ice.

In romantic genre fiction, therefore, when the villain is finally revealed, he often turns out to be someone very close to the hero. This would be less likely in, say, a Perry Mason novel—the antithesis to the romantic—where we would in any case be hard-pressed to find anyone whom the hero, Perry Mason, feels especially intense about. The two forms are antithetical: the one all feeling, the other cool ratiocination. We might read the one when we wish to have our emotions stirred, the other when we are in the mood for a puzzle.

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The narrative difficulties of romantic fiction begin and end with the concept of isolation. The positive side of isolation is the notion of complete self-sufficiency, which leads romantics to crave stories in which a character is physically isolated and obliged to fend for himself. So a story like Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*—another nick-name for brevity's sake, like *Gulliver's Travels*<sup>C</sup>—has great appeal for us, even though Defoe is in most respects not at all a precursor of the romantics. Defoe is not a romantic because he does not stylize Robinson Crusoe's dilemma as anything but a terrible disaster—visited upon him, indeed, by his disobedience to the wishes of his parents. So the novel ends not with some sort of symbol of the romantic quest for the infinite—like the ride into the sunset so common in the western—but with Robinson Crusoe's rescue and a brief hint at further adventures that might merit a sequel.

Reading *Robinson Crusoe*, you suspect that Friday rescues Defoe just as surely as Robinson Crusoe rescues Friday, for the two of them instruct Friday in English with almost indecent haste, presumably to allow interaction between Crusoe and something more responsive than a breadfruit tree. Physical isolation fulfills the romantic fantasy nicely, but it prevents interaction between characters.

But from this perspective, true romantic fiction is even worse off than *Robinson Crusoe*, for the characters are stylized as emotionally isolated as well. Therefore, romantic characters are typically non-articulate. In du Maurier's *Jamaica Inn*: “Men did not talk much...”<sup>5</sup> It is not that they could not express themselves; it is more that no one would

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C. Among well-known books, the all-time champion of long titles may be the novel we call *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It has not so much a title as a synopsis.

understand. The utterances of the romantic hero may be cogent, even brilliant, but they tend to be conversational dead-ends, as when James Bond makes a pun just as the villain is about to be squashed, or the hero of the western explains himself by uttering the word “Draw!” to the villain. And in any case, to a romantic, meaning is not something that can be articulated, it must be incorporated into symbols that tend toward the grand or unlimited or cosmic. All the interesting things are ineffable. In *Shane*, the symbol of Shane’s independence is the mountain range in the distance. Here is Shane when he makes his decision to take up his gun again:

He was staring over [the pasture] and the grazing steers at the great lonely mountains tipped with the gold of the sun now rushing down behind them. As I watched, he stretched his arms up, the fingers reaching to their utmost limits, grasping and grasping, it seemed, at the glory glowing in the sky.<sup>6</sup>

Stella Gibbons, in *Cold Comfort Farm*, her wonderful send-up of the (romantic) gothic novel, parodies this style when Elfine—the name tells all—reveals where she took her walk:<sup>D</sup>

“Yes...No...Away over there....” The vague gesture of her outflung arm sketched, in some curious fashion, illimitable horizons. Judith’s gestures had the same barrierless quality; there was not a vase left anywhere in the farm.<sup>7</sup>

Emotional isolation discourages the most fruitful forms of interaction between characters. The best of these is dialogue, which is infinitely variable; the possibilities for contrast are endless. But we damage our romantic fantasy if we make the hero chatty, for the fantasy begins and ends with emotional withdrawal stylized as grand and tragic. It is not going too far to see it as a mythic elaboration of moodiness and self-pity—it is no accident that romantic plots so often depend on the hero being misunderstood, even appearing cowardly or villainous. And the emotions are all at extremes. Thus, there is no room for negotiation in

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D. Parodies of literary forms usually mine the same human needs as the forms they parody. *Cat Ballou* is a parody of the western, but it’s also a rollicking good western. And *Cold Comfort Farm* ends with the standard ride off into the sunset, even if it’s in an airplane.

romantic fiction. This is easy to see if we try to imagine the Daemon in *Frankenstein* sitting down at a conference table to work out the details of his demands. Instead, what he asks of his creator is non-negotiable: make me a wife—isolation is the evil, love is its cure—or I will go over directly to revenge conceived in cosmic terms: “You can blast my other passions; but revenge remains—revenge, henceforth dearer than light or food! I may die; but first you, my tyrant and tormentor, shall curse the sun that gazes on your misery.”<sup>8</sup>

When was the last time you got mad enough to say *that* to somebody?

This tendency toward absolutes, and the dominance of feeling over thought, makes tragedy rather more likely than comedy in romantic fiction. The greatest romantic writers—Kleist and Melville come to mind—are seldom at their best when they are trying to be funny. I remember seeing a German performance of Kleist’s comedy *Der zerbrochene Krug* (*The Broken Pitcher*) and feeling as if someone were whaling on my funny bone with a cricket bat. The world, as Horace Walpole pointed out, is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel. In romantic literature, there is too much brooding and guilt for comedy—indeed, even the *monsters* are guilty: “No guilt, no mischief, no malignity, no misery, can be found comparable to mine,” says Frankenstein’s Daemon.<sup>9</sup> In the western this guilt has become a cliché: the past the hero cannot escape from. Shane says, “There’s no going back from a killing.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the point is not to incorporate the hero back into society at all: he may well save the world, then spurn it. Thus, at the end of *High Noon*, Gary Cooper, having saved the town, throws his marshal’s badge down at the feet of the townspeople who had blamed him for their dilemma but now want him to stay.

The loss of dialogue, as characters are isolated physically and emotionally, puts the author in a predicament. Writers without dialogue are a bit like cabinetmakers without a glue-pot: they can still put something together but it’s a lot more trouble. Writers seek to get around this problem in many ways. Mary Shelley, raised in a literary tradition that put characters into salons, resorts to some remarkable coincidences to get her narrator, Robert Walton, into the same venue as Frankenstein, who is pursuing his creation in the vicinity of Archangel: the narrator has set

off to explore the North Pole when he first spots the Daemon, then saves Frankenstein. Shelley has found the most godforsaken territory on earth—drawn there, no doubt, both by its isolation and the emblematic name of the nearest town—but must then somehow bring together narrator and character so as to have a story. And we must recall here that, while coincidence is anathema to our left brain, it draws itself to our attention in proportion to how much the events of the story hang on it. Competent authors often use coincidence to create problems but avoid it as a means of solving them.

So narrative exigencies demand little talkative clots of characters, but in romantic fiction, thematic exigencies disperse these. Where do they go? What replaces them?

Stay tuned.



#### References:

1. Kesselring, 183.
2. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 169.
3. Orson Scott Card, "Characters in Science Fiction," in Tompkins, 20.
4. Fleming, 22, 30-1.
5. Du Maurier, 138.
6. Schaefer, 100.
7. Gibbons, 154-5.
8. Mary Shelley, 169.
9. Mary Shelley, 219.
10. Schaefer, 113.



## Chapter Twelve

### Replacing Divots

No human being ever spoke of scenery for above two minutes at a time, which makes me suspect that we hear too much of it in literature.

—Robert Louis Stevenson, “Talk and Talkers”<sup>1</sup>

Suppose we set a play in the Old West, modeled on Mark Twain’s “The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.” Our characters are preparing for their annual spitting contest—the play is called *Great Expectations*—and go about all day with wads of chewing tobacco in their cheeks, which means they can only mumble incoherently. But this doesn’t matter, since they’re avoiding each other anyway, so as not to reveal their strategies for the Distance Medley or the High Trajectory Target-Shoot. Besides, they are characters out of the western, with a style of deliberate taciturnity.

It wouldn’t take us long to discover that we have created enormous difficulties for our story, since our characters are actually *avoiding* one another and can’t engage in conversation anyway. How do you contrast people who don’t approach each other?

This is the dilemma created in romantic fiction, which isolates characters physically and emotionally, and it gives us a clue as to why the stage is perhaps not its perfect venue. Novels are easier for telling a romantic story. And if you remove dialogue and gossip—all that talk—you have to replace it with something.

What replaces it is the material world, simply because that is what is left when you take most of the people out of fiction. It is surely no accident that nature became fascinating precisely when writers began to isolate their characters. The natural world rushed into the void left by all those talkative people. This is easiest to see if we imagine Thoreau building a hut on Walden Pond, isolating himself, and then deciding to write a book about his experience there without mentioning nature. Once

he is isolated, nature *is* his experience. Of course, Thoreau could have holed up in the basement of the Parks and Recreation Department, in which case later critics would have observed that he had a fascination with air ducts and heating equipment and concrete surfaces.

We see the invasion of nature in *Frankenstein*, where Shelley isolates Victor as he approaches Geneva:

It was completely dark when I arrived in the environs of Geneva; the gates of the town were already shut; and I was obliged to pass the night at Secheron, a village at the distance of half a league from the city. The sky was serene; and, as I was unable to rest, I resolved to visit the spot where my poor William had been murdered. As I could not pass through the town, I was obliged to cross the lake in a boat to arrive at Plainpalais. During this short voyage I saw the lightnings playing on the summit of Mont Blanc in the most beautiful figures. The storm appeared to approach rapidly; and, on landing, I ascended a low hill, that I might observe its progress. It advanced; the heavens were clouded, and I soon felt the rain coming slowly in large drops, but its violence quickly increased.<sup>2</sup>

In Jane Austen's novels, human events take up all the available space. But if we nonetheless try to imagine a similar encomium on a lightning storm in Jane Austen, we can do so only by ensuring that it be somehow related to the events of the story, merely because our left brain demands connection.<sup>A</sup> So in fiction not handicapped by the theme of psychological isolation, thunderstorms are functional in a fairly direct way: they might impede people, or speed them on. That is, the thunderstorm comes to the aid of the story. In romantic fiction, too, the author must find connections, but here the material world has a much greater place in the story, and it is not going too far to say that the story comes to the aid of the thunderstorm. Shortly after our passage from

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A. Rainstorms in *movies* of Jane Austen's novels are another matter. Austen's text of *Sense and Sensibility* has Marianne becoming deathly ill from wet stockings occasioned by walking in tall wet grass specifically when it was *not* raining (end of Chap. 42)—whereas in the movie directed by Emma Thompson, her ill-fated soaking comes from wandering off alone in a terrific rainstorm to where she can see the former lodgings of the man who jilted her: romantic on every level. But Thompson had to find ways to make visible the emotional states that Austen could simply describe.

*Frankenstein*, for example—and I have quoted only about half of it—the narrator fashions a relationship between the story and the thunderstorm: “While I watched the tempest, so beautiful yet terrific, I wandered on with a hasty step. This noble war in the sky elevated my spirits; I clasped my hands, and exclaimed aloud, ‘William, dear angel! this is thy funeral, this thy dirge!’”

This may not seem especially to the point—most of us never take such care to relate atmospheric systems to our personal circumstances—but remember that the alternative is a passage of significant length that is completely unconnected to the story. And this is where the cliché comes from that fictional weather tends to reflect or comment on the events of the story. In romantic fiction, where the phenomenal world is especially prominent, the weather is a bit like a balky child in a Christmas play: dragged in kicking and screaming and forced to play a role. “Jem Merlyn,” we read in du Maurier’s *Jamaica Inn*, “had brought something of the outer world with him, a world that was not entirely bounded by the moors and frowned upon by tors of granite; and now that he had departed the early brightness of the day went with him. The sky became overcast, and the inevitable rain came sweeping from the west, topping the hills in mist.”<sup>3</sup> If there is no one to talk about, then the weather gets talked about; if the weather gets into the novel, in any detail at all, it must be somehow connected to the events of the novel.

And, as always, the cliché suffers a parody: “It always surprised Flora to see the sun shining into the yard at Cold Comfort; she had a feeling that the rays ought to be short-circuited just outside the wall by the atmosphere of the farmhouse.”<sup>4</sup>

A writer can define characters with exceeding accuracy by the way they talk: there is no need to describe them, and description is in any case less dynamic a means of characterization than dialogue. So fiction often neglects description when dialogue is available to it. Thus, in the first sentence of *Emma*, Jane Austen is content to describe her heroine as “handsome, clever, and rich” before getting on with the story. Emma presumably has a body, but she lives and has her being in a novel that has no need to reveal bodies. (Note, however, that Austen’s heroine in *Northanger Abbey*, her parody of the gothic, is described in detail.) Voltaire’s characters get along fine without bodies. And who knows what

Perry Mason looks like? Erle Stanley Gardner was much too busy making him talk to bother telling us how tall he was, let alone what kind of clothes he wore.

Description too is obliged to be of a piece with the rest of the story. Like the weather, a character's outer person, if treated in more than a few words, must have some relevance to the story, so writers must find ways to pin the description firmly to the character and his or her fate. If you were a fictional character, you would not be allowed to don a tee-shirt or a cummerbund without justifying it as somehow relevant to your fate or character. In fiction, people are expected either to look like what they are or to look deceptively different. Here is Captain Bildad, in *Moby-Dick*: "His own person was the exact embodiment of his utilitarian character. On his long, gaunt body, he carried no spare flesh, no superfluous beard, his chin having a soft, economical nap to it, like the worn nap of his broad-brimmed hat."<sup>5</sup> Now Melville could have made Bildad look exactly the opposite of what he was: that would be irony, and irony is always connective because it implies a relationship—even if that relationship is the reverse of the expected—between two ideas or phenomena. This is why—and here comes a cliché—the hero of the western either looks so dangerous that heads turn when he walks into a bar, or he looks deceptively mild and unassuming, like James Stewart in *Destry Rides Again*. And sometimes, as in *Shane*, we are given both versions: "There seemed nothing remarkable about him, just another stray horseman riding up the road toward the cluster of frame buildings that was our town. Then I saw a pair of cowhands, loping past him, stop and stare after him with a curious intentness."<sup>6</sup> Like many clichés of fiction, this one could be said to be hard-wired into our brains. Thomas Mann is confronted with the same dilemma as Jack Schaefer when, in *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*), he describes the circumstances of Naphtha and Settembrini in too great detail to let these be unrelated to the story. Mann chooses irony: Settembrini, who has a sensuous, humanistic philosophy, lives a spartan life, whereas Naphtha, who has a philosophy of renunciation, lives a voluptuary one. Mann could also do a mix-and-match here, giving both characters the same lifestyle, provided he made this choice seem purposeful. But his option for irony gives greater contrast, hence vividness, to the characters.

When the material world takes an unusually large bite out of the narrative pie—as in *Moby-Dick*, where there are vast quantities of newness to be mined for the reader—the author may have to struggle to connect the story with it. The material, new to the reader, may be delectable but irrelevant, and then everything comes down to how keen our sense of coherence is. Paul Claudel, quoted by Gide, speaks scornfully of English writers “who have never learned that the rule of ‘nothing unessential’ is the first condition of art.”<sup>7</sup> One suspects that Claudel’s left brain would have a dismal time of it with *Moby-Dick*, where the most generous critic would find vast amounts of irrelevance. Most of us are clearly willing to trade off a certain amount of coherence in return for newness: I for one *like* Melville’s chapters on old pictures of whales. Naturally, someone interested primarily in art will make choices based on the artistic, and here the battle between coherence and newness is a first-round knockout. Like Claudel, critics often present coherence as the essence of art but seldom see novelty that way, while many readers routinely tolerate the irrelevant if it is interesting enough, as when James Bond goes to a sumo match while in Japan.

It must be noted, however, that writers have to work to connect story and setting only when these are otherwise unrelated to one another. In *Moby-Dick*, the extraneous material is that which deals with the various whales and how we kill them and smelt them down into something that can travel up a candle wick. And this would not be extraneous if the book were about how Ahab and Ishmael made their fortune on the high seas. Then the issue would be, will they kill enough whales? And the rendering of the whale-oil would be relevant. As it is, the issue is the attempt to track down and kill Moby-Dick. The details of whale-rendering are irrelevant; the details of whale-chasing and whale-killing are not.



Romeo: If I profane with my unworthing hand  
This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this,—  
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand  
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.  
—*Romeo and Juliet*, I. v

Imagine that the NFL Commissioner decided, in the interests of safety, to take collisions out of the game of football. You would still have a game, it just wouldn't look the same. The fullback would be dashing through the line when a safety came up and yelled, "Tackle!" And if the fullback didn't yell out the word "Elude!" in time, his forward progress would be marked at that point. The game is recognizable, but it's very different.

Something of this sort happens when romantic fiction cuts way down on dialogue. It is easiest to see with an extreme example. Imagine that you are writing a story in which your hero falls in love with the heroine and experiences massive confusion and dizzy spells when he's in her presence. You are about to write your love scene, but suddenly the Narrative Monitor interrupts to say that, by a new decree, characters are no longer allowed to communicate with each other through language. You argue, you expostulate, but in vain. Your hero cannot so much as say, "I love you"; in fact, he cannot say anything, in any circumstances, merely because it has been so decreed.

What to do? Before long you realize that not all is lost, for this decree does not prevent interaction between our characters: it simply forces all interaction to be physical rather than verbal. And so you have the happy inspiration of causing the hero to present the heroine with a single rose and gaze deeply into her eyes. She accepts the rose and touches her lips to it. Then you rely on description and images to convey your characters' emotional state. The Narrative Monitor is not thrilled, but he agrees reluctantly. "It's a bit of a cliché," he says. "It's a cliché because you've tied my hands," you say with some bitterness. "*You* come up with something."

It is not always so extreme as this, but this is the dilemma confronted by the writer of romantic fiction. Dialogue is by far the most subtle means of creating contrast and conflict between characters. But if dialogue is inappropriate—as it is in fiction that deals, after all, with the ineffable—then physical interaction must take its place if there is to be any interaction at all. When you wonder why Arnold Schwarzenegger had to shoot all those people in his action movies, you must ask yourself what alternative he had. If you make him chase after violent people without weapons, he becomes a bit of a fool. If you make his interactions verbal, he becomes a

different character altogether. And if he becomes a different character, then the story becomes a different story: in the long run, it doesn't work out well to have the villain shooting while the hero talks. Even the amiable Destry, trapped in a western movie, is forced finally to start shooting. With a cast of thousands, *Robinson Crusoe* might still be an interesting story but it wouldn't be the *same* story, as was demonstrated well enough by *Swiss Family Robinson*, in which a whole family, not just one man, was marooned on an island. As a story of self-sufficiency—the positive aspect of isolation—*Swiss Family Robinson* is made weaker than *Robinson Crusoe* in proportion to the greater support provided for the heroes. This was noted by two experts on isolation—children raised on the island of Genovesa, in the Galápagos Islands, where their parents were doing research. “Here they read *The Swiss Family Robinson* and hated it. They thought it was ridiculous that everything the family needed simply washed ashore. They liked *Robinson Crusoe* better...”<sup>8</sup>

Are there other alternatives to physical interaction—which usually means violence—in romantic fiction? Absolutely: you can have the material world itself attack the hero, as by having him accidentally set off an avalanche. The problem here is that inanimate forces lack animus and are not at all subtle in their interactions with characters: they don't learn from their experience, and they don't alter their attack in response to the hero's defense. Plotting possibilities are always greater if the villain has a mind to work with. In disaster movies, therefore, most of the interesting interaction is between characters, not between man and nature. That is, once the disaster is set off, the writer shows the characters getting into each other's hair. In Peter Benchley's *Jaws*, a great white shark invades the beaches of a resort, but most of the drama is between the people who don't want to breathe a word about the disaster and the people who want to shout it out to the world. However efficient a biter the great white shark is, there is a limit to how long mere biting, repeated again and again, can keep the audience on the edge of their seats. This is easiest to see if you imagine trying to write *Jaws* by making the shark into a constant threat, and the only one. Then you might end by putting your hero in a rowboat and having him whack at the shark with an oar for several hundred pages—a scenario impoverished in plotting possibilities.

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Because violence dominates in romantic genre fiction, villains are used up at a frightening rate. The standard solution to this problem is to create a kind of central repository of villains. Recall that the *central* problem can be solved only at the end of the story: until then only *aspects* of that problem can be solved, and the problem itself can only be shaped by the efforts of the hero. If you identify the central problem with a villain who is unknown or inaccessible, then you can cause him to send out his agents after the hero. The hero, then, occupies himself with thwarting or killing the agents and seeking out the villain. Each agent can bring newness into the story simply by attacking the hero in different ways: one brings bombs to the fray, another legalisms. Ultimately the hero will have to enter the villain's fortress, but there is a catch: because he is a romantic hero, and the romantic hero is a loner, the fantasy works best if he enters the villain's fortress all alone. This feeds the voracious theme of self-sufficiency in such fiction, which threatens at times to gobble up all probability. After all, the greater the number of villains, the more unlikely it is that a single man, however heroic, could best them all. As we have seen, one solution to this problem is to make the hero superhuman in some way—most superhero fiction is romantic to the core. Another is to let him enter the fortress alone, then let his friends come in to do the bulk of the one-on-one fighting against the hordes of villains. When this is done, the hero usually pursues the main villain against a background of battling good/bad guys.

In other words, the fortress derives ultimately from two tendencies: the tendency of romantic fiction to become cosmic—so that it is not just a person but the entire world that is threatened—and the need to have two people battle it out who will probably meet in person only late in the story. If you pit them against each other throughout, face to face, you get something like the guy in the rowboat beating the shark over the head with an oar for three hundred pages. Conflict must be constantly varied to remain interesting. The solution: send out waves of bad guys from that central repository of wickedness. This is hardly a new idea, of course: Homer did something similar in the *Iliad*, and certainly for the same



reasons. Obviously it wouldn't do to let Hector and Achilles duke it out for twenty-four books.<sup>B</sup>

And we must remember that our minds accept anything that is firmly established as a motif of fiction. In the film versions of the James Bond stories, the British government routinely sends Bond all alone to islands, volcanoes, and other typical villain-fortresses. Fleming's novels were more conservative here, perhaps because he was constrained by his knowledge of how the secret service actually operates.

The need to cause the villains to suffer complete annihilation is so powerful that, in the movies, they routinely rig their own fortresses with high explosives. This motif has acquired a life of its own: authors and movie-makers no longer find it necessary even to explain why villains pack explosives into every crevice of their hide-out.<sup>C</sup> Here again we need to consider the alternative: if all humanity is being saved, it's a bit of a let-down to put three hundred villains into handcuffs, read them their rights, and lead them off to trial.



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B. This is not to say the *Iliad* is a romantic story. Still, it's striking how, as you read it, you come to feel that you're watching the fate of the entire world, instead of a squabble between tribes. And the romantics routinely put themselves into Homer's dilemma—how to tell about a cosmic battle without sacrificing diversity, and therefore contrast.

C. The world of romantic fiction has a powerful hankering for explosions—so much so that all plausibility is sacrificed to it. Just last night I watched the end of a dreadful movie in which a boy throws a Molotov cocktail at a car and the car explodes instantly, without any of the usual preliminaries involving the fire gaining access to the gas in the tank.

#### References:

1. Stevenson, vol. 13, 270.
2. Mary Shelley, 75.
3. Du Maurier, 80-81.
4. Gibbons, 175.
5. Melville, 113.
6. Schaefer, 1.
7. Allott, 237.
8. Weiner, 172.

## Chapter Thirteen

### Rosebuds

Thus a good symbol is the best argument, and is a missionary to persuade thousands.

—Emerson, *Poetry and Imagination*<sup>1</sup>

In his introduction to *Moby-Dick*, Charles Feidelson, Jr., gives a good capsule summary of the romantic: “a search for the Absolute, a belief in the primacy of feeling, a fascination with dreams and nightmares, and a combined love and fear of nature.”<sup>2</sup> My own view is that these seemingly disparate elements of the romantic are largely consequences of the decision to focus on isolated characters and their internal problems. When a character is brooding over his or her isolation, feeling may be more to the point than thinking.

And surely nature becomes important in romanticism because characters have to be somewhere, and experience something, when they are removed from human company. Nature is what is left when you remove human beings; it leaps into the void left when gossip and human interaction depart. Even the Absolute could be seen as an inevitable expression of the grandiosity of the untrammelled ego. If we trammel that ego—say by confining it in the usual conventions of society—its aspirations probably have to be reduced to “realistic” dimensions. You get some idea of how inhibiting social intercourse is if you compare your fantasies to what you actually say in polite society. Imagine that you’ve spent a long day being shunted from one line to another at the Department of Motor Vehicles, and now you’re at a party, and the hostess asks you what you’re thinking. Do you (a) own up to your fantasy about setting off a chain-reaction that somehow communicates itself through the phone lines from one DMV office to the other so that each office, with all its bureaucrats, suffers a sudden and terrifying meltdown—never mind how—while the innocent civilians are somehow whisked away from the destruction—? Or do you (b) lie and say you were admiring her living

room? Fantasy is grandiose and thrives in the shadows; in the light, bare naked, it tries to cover.

We can also approach this issue by moving characters around, in our imagination, from romantic fiction into non-romantic and highly social fiction. You could not introduce Captain Ahab into *Emma* except as a comic figure—that strange fellow who stomps about on his ivory peg-leg muttering nautical terms and glowering. In social fiction, obsession is never glorious; it is always *infra dig*. “So, Captain Ahab,” says Emma’s father, Mr. Woodhouse, “what is this sea-voyage all about?” “I intend to chase down the sperm whale that gnawed off my leg and harpoon him through and through.” “I see,” says Mr. Woodhouse doubtfully, and he offers Captain Ahab a small egg, boiled very soft. But you could also not introduce Emma’s friend Knightley into *Moby-Dick* without severe consequences. Knightley, who gives Emma a talking-to for what high crime? For meddling! Imagine Knightley on board the *Pequod*—but your imagination won’t stretch that far, and neither will mine. Romantic fiction and social fiction are incompatible because they begin from different assumptions about where to place the focus of the story: on the psyche of an isolated, moody character, incompatible with society, or on a character intended ultimately to function as an especially successful *member of* society. If you choose the first option, your hero loses certain possibilities that come with the second—he or she can’t be hoisted into a secure and enviable place in society. The usual response of the author is to stylize the social isolation of the romantic hero as doomed originality.

Emma’s actual fate would be dismally unsatisfying to the reader if her imagination were shown up close, and it was grandiose and sublime. Knightley is a fine reward for a social Emma, but not for a romantic one: that Emma would end the novel entwined in some sort of elaborate rhetorical flourish that hinted at infinity. The more transcendent Emma’s desires, the more preposterous it becomes to try to satisfy them with marriage and position in society. This would be like having Frankenstein and his Daemon sit down together and reason out their differences. Austen actually contrasts two such heroines in *Sense and Sensibility*: Elinor acts with “sense” whereas her sister Marianne, a romantic, acts on “sensibility” (now termed “sensitivity”—but which we might define here as “self-indulgent sentimentalism”); and Marianne, dumped by the

dashingly romantic cad Willoughby, finally settles for the heroic and taciturn (but older and now suitably domesticated) Colonel Brandon.

It is this issue—the clash of romantic transcendence and our more homely fantasies—that prevents Daphne du Maurier from giving the heroine of *Jamaica Inn* a more hopeful outlook for a good marriage. At the end of the novel, the hero tells the heroine that he’s a horse thief and offers her the following prospectus: “If you come with me it will be a hard life, and a wild one at times, Mary, with no biding anywhere, and little rest and comfort. Men are ill companions when the mood takes them, and I, God knows, the worst of them. You’ll get a poor exchange for your farm, and small prospect of the peace you crave.”<sup>3</sup> Not a model proposal, you might think. But du Maurier is faced with a dilemma, not a solvable problem: the goal of the romantic quest *is* the quest, and that cannot end at all, let alone end with anything stable, while most of us include stability among our criteria for a good marriage. If you cause characters to seek transcendence and to burst all bounds of social propriety and decorum, then you cannot simultaneously set them up as stable, prosperous figures in human society. It is this dilemma that has caused authors of some westerns to create two heroes, one to end up with social success, the other to live out the romantic fantasy.



For dhrames always go by contrairies, my dear.

—Samuel Lover, *Rory O'More* (1836)<sup>4</sup>

The primacy of dreams in romantic fiction, which has been pointed out many times,<sup>A</sup> surely derives from their being a form of experience of the isolated individual that can easily be made relevant to a story. This is not just because dreams have traditionally been seen as expressive of the future of the dreamer—at least until Freud, when they became expressive of his or her past.<sup>B</sup> It is easier and more natural for the writer to

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A. See, for example, Albert Béguin’s *L’Âme romantique et le rêve. Essai sur le romantisme allemand et la poésie française*.

B. Theorists now tend to view them as what happens when the brain tries to make sense of random hiccups in our neural connections. Here, as it often does, science has grimly thrown out meaning and significance as unprovable. See Hobson, *The Dreaming Brain*.

incorporate a dream into a story, and give it meaning, than, say, a marble coffee table. The coffee table resolutely maintains its natural, real-world form and function; the dream can be easily modified to fit the story. It won't do to argue that, since the dream occurs in real life, it need hardly be accounted for when it occurs in a *story* about life. Real life provides a wealth of material that never makes it into fiction. Nor are dreams inevitable in fiction: they tend to co-occur with isolated characters—they are part of that flood of phenomena that rushes into the void left when large numbers of characters depart, and they even allow (vivid) dialogue to sneak back in. They are also useful for foreshadowing events.

But their occurrence in fiction has little in common with how we have traditionally viewed them in real life. Since dreams have always been taken for manifestations of the spirit world, and the spirit world is a mirror-image of the phenomenal world, dream-interpretation, ever since Artemidoros's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, has assumed that a dream means the *opposite* of what it seems to.<sup>5</sup> This principle has maintained itself for close to two millennia, and probably longer, so that modern ethnographers can still record such remarks as the following: "If you dream about a birth, you'll hear about a death."<sup>6</sup> "Dream about the dead, and you will hear from the living."<sup>7</sup> Fictional dreams ignore the rule of opposites, just as they ignore other traditional aspects of dream-interpretation. In fiction, the dream means whatever the author needs to have it mean.

So dreams are unusually flexible in that they can be adapted to express whatever is needed, without any loss of connection to the rest of the story. And they are doubly flexible because, unlike the rest of the story, they need not even satisfy the "logical" or "real life" forms of coherence. A character in a "realistic" story can have only realistic experiences, unless the author is willing to risk a break in style, but he can have surrealistic dreams any time the author likes, for dreams are, well, naturally surrealistic. Surrealistic writing, in fact, tends to take the dream as its model, perhaps because the alternative is to cut fiction completely away from human experience.

But by being freed from "real life," dreams can be not only coherent but contrastive as well. Even so, they cannot escape from the limitations of our cognition, and we eventually tire of anything an author does, so

when dreams are used too often, they too bore us.

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Symbolism, also, is a preoccupation of the Romantics. When I first began to think about symbolism, many years ago, it seemed obvious that symbols serve to express the abstract with concrete phenomena. The author incorporates meaning into an object. That satisfied me for a time, for I was already convinced that the writer's education consists largely in moving from the abstract to the concrete. But the "meaning" of a symbol is its least interesting part, if by that we mean what the teacher wants us to say in response to the question, "What does this stand for?" You simply can't attach much meaning to an object in a novel without hopelessly confusing the reader. The meaning gains some complexity, but not much, through the use of the symbol throughout the story. But the writer does not advance human knowledge by saying "love" or "honor" with a rose or a sword. The importance of a symbol lies not in its abstract meaning but in what it can evoke.

The paucity of meaning in symbols is hinted at when a book reviewer treats the symbolism in a novel as if it were embarrassingly obvious. But when you rip the living symbol out of its context and present it, bloody and quivering, to the reader, it simply doesn't look imposing. It is a bit like a hunter tossing a haunch of venison onto the kitchen counter: it is now animal protein, not a manifestation of living nature, and we can be forgiven for not expressing delight at its form.

It won't do, then, to approach symbolism as though its point were its message. It is more useful to begin by noting that symbolism does not occur in all fiction—a helpful clue. A while back I looked through the MLA bibliography and couldn't find a single article on Jane Austen's use of symbolism—something that won't surprise the reader at all. In general, the more the material world intrudes into fiction, the more likely it is that symbolism will occur. And, as we have seen, the material world inevitably intrudes when characters are isolated. Romanticism, as a type of fiction that isolates characters, is often fairly heavy in symbolism.

This does not mean either that fiction that isolates characters must be heavily symbolic (*Robinson Crusoe* is not) or that other kinds of fiction cannot be. As we shall see, there is more than one reason for using symbols. And symbolism is most likely to show up in fiction where the

phenomenal world is otherwise a dead weight in the story. In *Robinson Crusoe* the phenomenal world is given all the relevance it needs merely by being the source of Crusoe's difficulties and the focus of his struggles.

If you read Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, you will probably conclude, especially if goaded by an English professor, that Jewel's horse is a representation of something like his manhood and freedom. Beyond any doubt it is a symbolic horse. Jewel's horse becomes expressive when he sells it for his mother's funeral, because he is sacrificing much more than a horse: he is, in effect, giving his all. If he gave away a non-symbolic horse, on the other hand, he would be giving away something of finite value, something that could be replaced. Symbols seem to express abstractions, but note that Jewel's horse is not replaceable with any other horse: it is a *pièce unique*, the only horse of its kind. Paradoxically, while you can abstract a "meaning" for the horse, the horse is really the ultimate in concreteness, not abstraction. *Horse* stands for many gaminivorous quadrupeds, but *Jewel's horse* stands for just one, and that one is, in fundamental ways, not even like the others. The symbolism makes the general (*horse*) more specific and the specific (*Jewel's horse*) more general. By making the horse into a symbol, Faulkner has transformed Jewel's offering into something total and irreplaceable. It is the difference between giving your lover a large-denomination bill and giving her a wedding ring fashioned out of nuggets you panned out of the river where you first proposed to her. So the "meaning" of Jewel's horse is Jewel's manhood and freedom, but its significance is that it reveals an ultimate sacrifice. Like most symbolism, it allows an abstraction to gain access to our emotions.

Symbolism is the simplest way to express that sense of the infinite, the unconstrained, which is the altar the Romantics worship at. Symbolic watches and clocks do not tell you what time it is, they tell you when time comes to an end, or when time merges with eternity—romantics always choose the eternal over the timely. The clichéd version of this is the timepiece that prefigures a character's death, like the watch in the movie *La Strada*.<sup>C</sup> In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov's watch has a globe

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C. Sometimes life follows art. When Pushkin died as the result of a duel, the people attending him stopped the clock in his apartment. It can be seen there to this day, eternally signifying the moment of the great romantic poet's death.

engraved on it, implying that it is more than just a watch that he pawns to the old woman whom he will kill.

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But symbolism also helps the romantic out of the dilemma created by incorporating masses of the material world into his or her story. All that material must be made relevant to the story, simply because our brains say so. Symbolism is an especially elegant means of forming connections between the material world and the story: then the material world, far from being dead weight in the story, is actually expressive of it. Then the author can define man's fate by reference to his lodgings: "We were lodged in an ancient religious house," says the narrator of Gide's *L'Immoraliste*, "which had been turned into a hotel."<sup>8</sup> Naturally, the demand for coherence requires that, once he has made dwelling places symbolic, the author not mislead the reader with casual references to housing issues. And in fact Gide consistently uses dwellings symbolically: the southern houses are open to nature—one is "almost nothing but a terrace."<sup>9</sup> And this symbolism is inevitably connected to other symbolism associated with north and south: in the north, thought, abstractions; in the south, life, the sensual. Flowers become a kind of shorthand for the sensual, hence for the south: when the narrator brings them into the house, his wife Marceline bursts into tears because they smell too strong.<sup>10</sup> Marceline is a northerner; at the beginning of the novel she is stronger than her husband,<sup>11</sup> but she wastes away in the south and dies just after her husband betrays her with another woman—the sensual conquering the abstract. Geography becomes expressive: a trip from north to south has "all the dizzy sensations of a fall."<sup>12</sup> And imagery and symbolism work together: Switzerland is "a hardy rose-tree, without thorns or flowers."<sup>13</sup> Here again, if some flowers are symbolic, then all must be: the reader will inevitably read meaning into them.

Even though symbolism is certainly all but inevitable in fiction that isolates its characters, this is not the same thing as saying that the writer reasons out the consequences of the material world intruding into fiction and needing to be attached to the story with a strand of coherence. There is no rule saying that writers need to know what they're doing: there is just a rule saying that only the ones who do it right will attract very many readers. If writers always knew what they were doing, they would be



more consistent. It is always the hacks who are most consistent—it is only moderately hard to write consistent pulp—while the most ambitious writers usually have a clinker in there somewhere. But the writer’s organ of coherence is jarred by extraneous material before the reader’s ever has a chance to be.



The land itself is a character in this story, and Balzar’s descriptions are utterly radiant.

—Review of John Balzar’s *Yukon Alone*, in  
L. A. Times *Book Review*, 3/26/00

The inevitable connectedness between material world and story has led to a curious cliché of modern book-reviewing: the remark that the setting of a novel is actually a character in the novel. This was parodied some years ago in a *New Yorker* skit in which various cities appeared as themselves. (Unaccountably, New York was rude and pushy.) This cliché has been around for many years, and as silly as it seems, it expresses a real phenomenon: the connectedness of setting and story in good writing. Two weeks after the appearance of this skit, I found the cliché alive and well—in the *New Yorker*.

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As with everything in fiction, all the particularly nice uses of symbolism become clichés: if thirty dollars, zloty, or lei are paid to a fictional character, the reader must inevitably see this as payment for a betrayal—the thirty pieces of silver paid to Judas. The night that Sonya’s stepmother forces her into prostitution (in *Crime and Punishment*), Sonya presents her with the thirty rubles she has earned. Such symbolism allows for subtle little currents and eddies of meaning to whirl around the events of the story, so that the literal and symbolic meanings of a given event can be in ironic relationship to each other. In *Crime and Punishment*, Svidrigailov, Raskolnikov’s evil half, remarks that he had decided at one point to offer Dunya all his money—“I could have realized as much as thirty thousand even then”<sup>14</sup>—if she would run away with him. The “thirty thousand” reminds us that threes and thirties, in *Crime and Punishment* at least, always designate betrayal. Svidrigailov’s manner is

chatty and reveals nothing of his evil motives: it is left to the symbolism to do that. And in this way Dostoyevsky creates a sharp contrast—and that implies vividness—between manner and underlying meaning. Once again we must apologize for ripping the symbols out of the text: like poppies, they wilt quickly when yanked out of their natural environment. It is only in its functioning, after all, that the symbol comes to life. This is why it looks a bit wary and out of sorts when ripped out of context.



Counting flowers on the wall,  
That don't bother me at all.  
—The Statler Brothers, “Flowers on the Wall”

Some things in the physical world are more likely to be used as symbols than other things. In theory, a safety-deposit box could be used to express something like “secretness” or “being closed off from the world.” (The rule of coherence might dissuade us from using it to express “free-spiritedness.”) The problem would be getting the symbol near the action of the story—unless the characters kept talking about their money, or the story kept veering off toward any and all banks in the setting, or the setting *was* a bank. So writers tend to choose as symbols those objects that can be relied on to be both unobtrusive and near the events of the story. If they are movable, or even ambulatory, all the better. Moreover, writers have a clear preference for objects that can occur in a variety of forms: this allows them to use the symbol to show not just a condition but a change of condition.

Flowers are heavily used as symbols perhaps because they can occur virtually anywhere; they can be either fresh or wilted, either real or artificial, and can also show up as pictures or as figures in wallpaper or carpets. If a fresh rose symbolizes love, the death of love may be shown with a wilted one. When flowers occur on wallpaper or in carpets, they are often shown to be faded—a way of implying that the character's way of life or spiritual condition is at some remove from the natural and healthy. In du Maurier's *Jamaica Inn*, the narrator lets Mary Yellan's surroundings express something of her depressed condition: “...the draught

from the door she had forgotten to close ruffled a long torn strip of paper on the wall. There had once been a rose pattern, but it was now faded and grey, and the walls themselves were stained deep brown where the damp had turned them.”<sup>15</sup>

In *Crime and Punishment*, hounded and isolated by his crime, Raskolnikov finds the same grimy little rooms, with the same yellowed wallpaper, everywhere he goes, and several times he is shown studying the faded flowers on it. In Gide’s *L’Immoraliste*, the flowers are an expression of sensuality, but in *Crime and Punishment*, they could be said to have an opposite meaning: something like “spiritual wholeness.”<sup>D</sup> This is why, when Nastasia tells Raskolnikov that Lizaveta was killed, “Raskolnikov turned to the wall where, from among the little flowers on the dirty yellow wallpaper, he picked out one clumsy white flower with little brown lines and began studying it: how many leaves it had, what sort of serrations the leaves had, and how many little lines.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, he contemplates his murder of Lizaveta, the innocent sister of his intended victim, only after he has committed it. Late in the novel, Svidrigailov, Raskolnikov’s evil half, ends up in one of these rooms, just before his suicide, and his moral degeneration is implied by the state of the wallpaper: the pattern is no longer even visible. It won’t do to argue that, if the pattern isn’t visible, we can’t know that it is a floral pattern, for when an object in a novel is once infected with symbolism, it can never be cured of it: that would violate our sense of coherence. And if you argue that maybe the wallpaper isn’t symbolic, you’ll have a devil of a time explaining not only why, from time to time, Raskolnikov stares closely at wallpaper—something most of us seldom if ever do, with the possible exception of the Statler Brothers—but also why he is offended when he finds workmen replacing the old yellow wallpaper with new white wallpaper at the apartment of his victim.<sup>17</sup> The yellowing that obscures the flowers is a symbol of his crimes against women and surely has its origin in the yellow pass that Sonia, forced into prostitution, has to carry. So for Svidrigailov, who takes advantage of women, there is nothing left to the wallpaper, shortly before he kills himself, but the yellow color. And

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D. Sensualism in Dostoevsky—and in mysticism in general, both eastern and western—is always the opposite of spirituality.

Raskolnikov is offended by the new wallpaper because it expresses, as symbol, a spiritual wholeness opposed to his own spiritual degradation.



Poetry is what gets lost in translation.

—Robert Frost<sup>18</sup>

The simplest way to understand symbolism in fiction is to rip it out of a story and see what you have left. In the movie *Harold and Maude*, Maude's symbol is the sunflower. Now, explicators of texts are stuck with trying to express the meaning of symbols, but of course the meaning of a symbol is not readily translatable into another language—any more than one can easily express in English the “meaning” of a passage in a Bach fugue. Still, we will consider it adequate to say that Maude's sunflower represents something like her life-affirming philosophy, which is opposed to Harold's obsession with death. We can imagine the movie without the sunflowers, but it won't do to leave out the information they convey, so this would have to be expressed in some other way.

If we try to do this, we quickly find that there are few other forms that are adequate to express the same information. If we have the characters talk it out, then we have reduced the visual to the abstract, and the abstract is non-contrastive. So we lose drastic amounts of vividness whenever we get rid of something concrete (the sunflowers) in favor of something abstract (philosophical language). Moreover, even if language were an adequate tool for expressing the meaning of the sunflowers, it would still make no sense to limit ourselves to a monotone form of expression. In fact, in the interests of generating diversity—and therefore vividness—we would want as many forms of expression as possible.

In *Harold and Maude*, Harold's symbol is a little more complicated than Maude's. His two issues are his mother's control over him and his obsession with death, and these are combined into one symbol when she gives him a new car and he rebuilds it into a hearse. Here the possibilities for sudden turns of events, suffused with meaning, are truly extraordinary. Once the issues are embodied in a symbolic car, they can be stolen, given away, or even run out of gas. Note how easily you accepted the

metaphorical meaning of “run out of gas.” In *Harold and Maude*, if the flower wins out over the car, we can be pretty sure the car will end up in the junkyard.

The expressiveness of a symbol can be extraordinarily direct and powerful. To stay with symbolic flowers, you can cause them to wilt, to be thrown out, to be given away—whatever is appropriate to the story. In Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane*, a flower is used to sum up the whole tragedy of the main character, whose last word, as he dies, is “Rosebud.” A newspaper reporter is given the task of tracking down the meaning of Kane’s utterance but fails. In the meantime, the audience sees Kane as a youngster, wanting to play in the snow with his sled but forced to come inside to meet the man who will take him away forever. And at the end of the movie, as workmen are clearing out Kane’s possessions, we see them toss a sled onto a fire—a sled with the word “Rosebud” on it. Rosebud goes up in flames.

Now, we are translating from one language to another, and we would do well to keep in mind Robert Frost’s remark that poetry is what gets lost in translation, but the substance of the message is something like this: Kane has been robbed of his childhood, represented by the sled, and in his last moment—fabulously rich and powerful—his life is summed up by this loss rather than by his achievements. The sled is given its name both because “sled” wouldn’t have quite the appropriate impact as Kane’s last word and because “rosebud” suggests youth—a rosebud is a young rose, after all.

If you have seen the movie, you will admit that there is a profound difference in impact between the symbol and my attempt to verbalize its meaning. This is the whole point of symbols: they attach the abstract (in this case, “childhood”) to the concrete (the sled), so as to allow the abstract to do what it couldn’t do otherwise: to function in the story in a concrete and contrastive way. Once you attach your character’s childhood to a sled, you can let him lose it, throw it away, or even hit someone with it: the young Kane shoves the sled at the man who is taking him away from his family.



“I am lying here in the dark waiting for death.” The light was within a foot of his eyes.

—Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*<sup>19</sup>

If you write a story about a character going into “darkest Africa,” it may occur to you to base your symbolism on light and darkness. Certainly this occurred to Conrad when he wrote *Heart of Darkness*. If you read Conrad’s story, therefore, you will do well to pay attention to any and all candles, lamps, and beacons. Even an oil painting showing a torch can’t come into the story without, well, casting light on it:

Then I noticed a small sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre—almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister.<sup>20</sup>

Here we see a symbol expressing something like this: the Dark Continent overwhelms the efforts to introduce the light of civilization, borne by people who are themselves unable to see.

But while light and darkness provide the central symbols of *Heart of Darkness*, there is other symbolism as well. Shoes become a natural symbol of wanderlust. So when a character gives or throws away his shoes, we are being told that he has foresworn his spirit of adventure. “The other shoe went flying into the devil-god of that river. I thought, By Jove, it’s all over.”<sup>21</sup> Here we see Conrad obeying some of the common rules of symbolism: you use an object that can go anywhere—shoes are good at this—is unobtrusive, and has a coherent relationship to what it expresses. That is, Conrad wouldn’t use a tree stump as a symbol of wanderlust.<sup>E</sup>

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Symbolism, then, is a way of attaching the physical world of a novel to the events in the novel, so it could be said to gratify both coherence and

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E. But you might use a tree stump as a symbol of an intransigent problem that can be overcome only by immense perseverance, as Jack Schaefer does in *Shane*. Shane and Starrett dig the stump out, while Marian is baking a pie, but the pie burns as she watches the contest between man and stump. Marian fetches more apples and bakes another pie—perseverance, remember?—and Shane, as he eats a piece of pie, observes, “That’s the best bit of stump I ever tasted.”

contrast—the one because the (otherwise independent) material world is attached to the story by strands of meaning, the other because the symbol is something concrete, and the concrete is always more vivid, more contrastive, than the abstract. Indeed, a symbol can be unexpected, hence startling.

Symbols can be used to express any number of things, but they are perhaps most commonly used to express things that would otherwise have to come out in inherently dull forms such as internal monologue. Authors go to great lengths to avoid any kind of expression that is static and therefore potentially boring. What we have been seeing, then, is how writers take everything internal to the character—feelings, attitudes—and externalize it so as to generate contrast.



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6. Koch, 233.
7. Koch, 234.
8. Gide, 45.
9. Gide, 19.
10. Gide, 130.
11. Gide, 10.
12. Gide, 127.
13. Gide, 126.
14. Dostoevsky (1993), 477.
15. Du Maurier, 81.
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17. Dostoevsky (1993), 171.
18. Frost, quoted in Winokur, 63.
19. Conrad, 70.
20. Conrad, 25.
21. Conrad, 48.

## Chapter Fourteen

### Bugs of Uncommon Shape

But inferior poets are absolutely fascinating. The worse their rhymes are, the more picturesque they look.

—Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*<sup>1</sup>

Then 'tis not cold that doth the fire put out,  
But 'tis the wet that makes it die, no doubt.

—Margaret Cavendish, *What is Liquid*<sup>2</sup>

One of my favorite comic poets, and a noted theoretician of thermal dynamics, is Margaret Cavendish, a duchess of the seventeenth century who is buried in Westminster Abbey. The Duchess, who achieved comic status against her will, probably did more to push back the frontiers of taste than anyone in her generation. Fortunately for us, Wyndham Lewis and Charles Lee rescued some of her best work in their anthology of bad verse, *The Stuffed Owl*. In the following poem she wrestles grimly with a conceit that supposes nature a cook and human beauty a kind of omelet. A writer of less character or more refinement might have slunk away from the contest with bruised feelings and a valuable lesson in rhetoric, but Margaret Cavendish carries the fight to the enemy:

Life scums the cream of Beauty with Time's spoon,  
And draws the claret-wine of Blushes soon;  
Then boils it in a skillet clean of Youth,  
And thicks it well with crumbled bread of Truth;  
Sets it upon the fire of Life which does  
Burn clearer much when Health her bellows blows;  
Then takes the eggs of fair and bashful Eyes,  
And puts them in a countenance that's wise,  
Cuts in a lemon of the sharpest Wit—  
Discretion as a knife is used for it—  
A handful of chaste Thoughts, double-refined,



Six spoonfuls of a noble and gentle Mind,  
A grain of Mirth to give't a little taste,  
Then takes it off for fear the substance waste,  
And puts it in a basin of good Health,  
And with this meat doth Nature please herself.<sup>3</sup>

It is easy to say what's wrong with this poem, but it is much harder to explain why it is funny. What is wrong with it is that it draws its metaphor from a subject—cooking—that we deem unacceptable in verses about human beauty, then explores that metaphor in far too much detail. Readers could take perhaps two lines of this without feeling as if they had been whacked solidly on the funny-bone. The ethereal (human beauty) and the mundane (crumbled bread used to thicken a sauce) don't coexist well, at least not in the same skillet. Eggs are questionable as a component of stately verse, certainly as a metaphor for the human eye. And the denouement—Nature has apparently stir-fried up a batch of *homo sapiens* just for a snack—derives inexorably from the logic of the preceding lines while still catching the reader by surprise. It is a nice anticipation, however unintentional, of that more savage post-Darwinian Nature, red in tooth and claw.

But why is it funny? We don't appear to know very much about humor, for if we did, we wouldn't have so many different theories about it.<sup>4</sup> But this is a good thing, as it frees us from the need to construct a comprehensive theory of humor, and in this chapter we will do nothing more ambitious than to suggest that humor seems to have something to do with the cognitive imperatives we have been discussing, coherence and contrast.

The recognition that humor involves heightened contrast is not new. William Hazlitt said, "The essence of the laughable...is the incongruous, the disconnecting one idea from another, or the jostling of one feeling against another."<sup>5</sup> I would argue that the incongruous by itself, no matter how contrastive, is not reliably funny. We can test this hypothesis by creating a highly incongruous scene: imagine that a painter joined a human head to the neck of a horse, then spread many-colored feathers over limbs gathered from here and there, so that what began, at the top, as a lovely woman ended below in a black and ugly fish. It is this imaginary painting with which Horace opens the *Ars poetica*, and he asks if you

could refrain from laughing at it. Probably we could; in fact, I'm pretty sure I saw something like this last week at an art gallery in Santa Monica. Incongruity is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for humor.

Here it is helpful to think of vividness as a continuum organized the way a New Yorker might think of the U.S., with dullness in the far west:

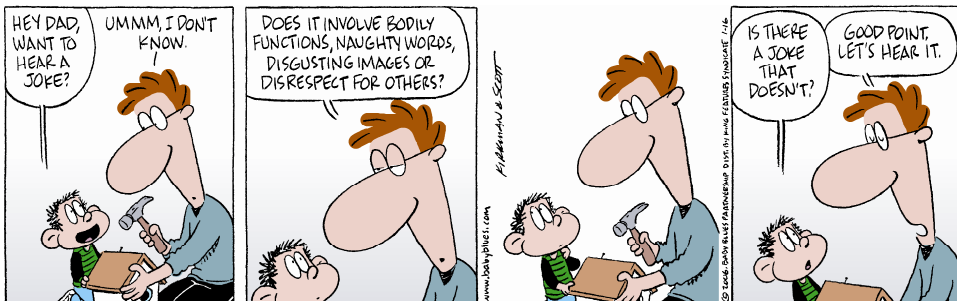
**Dull:** lacking contrast, coherent

**Vivid:** high contrast, coherent

**Humorous:** high contrast, divergent forms of coherence

**Preposterous:** very high contrast, coherence lacking

Humor is distinctive in that it contains contrast between two forms of coherence. Perhaps the most common forms of coherence that show up together in jokes are the ones I have referred to as the “logical” and the “real life” forms, which when put into the same joke can force the listener into some very sudden shifts of allegiance. That is, the joke may contain an inexorable logic that diverges in startling ways from what we know about real life. The following joke, which I cite purely for purposes of illustration, since it brings up all the issues, was brought into my life by a



**Fig. 4. The inherent hazards of jokes.**

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prim and brilliant young lady of my acquaintance who apologized abjectly for its utter tastelessness, as do I:

After the Disney film, the seven dwarves get a lot of media attention and go on a European tour and are invited to the Vatican to meet the Pope. And they're just leaving him when Dopey stops and looks back.

"Mr. Pope," he says, "are there any nuns in the Vatican who are dwarves?"

The Pope's a bit puzzled by this, but he smiles and shakes his head. "Why no, Dopey, there aren't."

"Ah," said Dopey, and he seems disappointed.

He starts to leave again, but then he turns around and asks, "Does the Church have any nuns *anywhere* in Italy that are dwarves?"

"I'm afraid not," says the Pope, trying to be polite.

Dopey turns to leave again, and he sees the other dwarves looking at him with a kind of I-told-you-so look on their faces.

He turns again to the Pope and implores him: "Does the Church have *any nuns anywhere* that are dwarves?"

"I'm afraid not, Dopey," says the Pope, and he's getting a little exasperated. And all of a sudden the other dwarves all start to chant:

"Dopey [*had carnal relations with*] a penguin, Dopey [*etc.*] a penguin!"

Here is a wealth of contrast: pompous/silly, sacred/profane, real/fictional. The pomp and deliberation of a papal audience devolve into a childish taunt. A variety of social taboos are violated here: nuns, dwarves, churches, and Popes should never ever be put together with bestiality and cartoon characters. And the cartoon characters are precisely the most decorous of their kind—from Disney yet. If they had an audience with the Pope, the real dwarves—that is, the real *fictional* dwarves—oh, never mind—would never use the "F" word. The logic, meanwhile, gives coherence to the events: if not a dwarf nun, then—necessarily—something else that is black and white and short: a penguin.

But while the logic gives coherence to the joke, without which the joke would be merely preposterous, it is itself violently in contrast with the logic of "real life." In fact most of us seldom mistake penguins for dwarf nuns. Like almost all jokes, this joke cannot be funny to all people. A devout Catholic, or a dwarf nun, might find that the taboos it violates

erect a solid and impenetrable barrier around his or her funny-bone. Yet to make such a joke harmless is to remove its humor. Humor, then, is always “situational,” in that humorist and subject have to agree on what is contrastive, what is coherent, and what simply goes too far for our sense of propriety.

Jokes may also give a preposterous logic that expresses some commonly accepted notion of “real life,” instead of violating same. Let us look at another joke based on the fairy tale of Snow White:

Snow White goes to heaven, and when she gets to the pearly gates, she meets St. Peter. “We don’t let just anyone into heaven,” he says. “For one thing, you have to prove that you’re a virgin.”

So they go off into a little hut near the gates, and he’s going to check her out. Pretty soon the Archangel Gabriel hears a commotion outside the pearly gates. He goes out and finds a long line of people chanting and stomping their feet.

“Hey!” he says, “What’s going on, anyway?”

“Saint Peter disappeared into that hut with Snow White, and we’re getting tired of waiting.”

Just then St. Peter and Snow White come out of the hut.

“Hey, Pete, what’s going on? These people have been waiting.”

“I had to check and see if she was a virgin.”

“Come on, that shouldn’t take that long. Was she or wasn’t she?”

St. Peter shakes his head, puzzled. “She had her maidenhead all right, but there were seven little dents in it.”

In both jokes there is a violent contrast between two commonly accepted forms of coherence: logic and “real life.” Either the logic is impeccable but untrue or the logic is ridiculous but demonstrates something that, for the purposes of the joke, can be seen as probable. Everything about the Snow White joke is preposterous except for the cynical assumptions about human sexuality contained in the punch line, and these open up a revised view of the fairy tale with dizzying speed. These forms of coherence are like trains running on parallel tracks. Suddenly the conductor informs the passengers that they are not only on the wrong train but have only a fragment of a second to leap over to the other train if they are to reach

their destination. The leap is exhilarating, because for the tiniest moment there is nothing supporting the passenger at all. If he can't make that leap—the second train doesn't appear at the right time, or perhaps doesn't look like a train at all—then he doesn't make the leap successfully. Above all, he has only one brief opportunity to make that leap, and then it is too late. Explanations are futile and will not get him to his destination.



Her fair companions, one and all,  
Rejoicing crowd the strand;  
for now her lover swam in call,  
And almost touch'd the land.

Then through the white surf did she haste,  
To clasp her lovely swain;  
When, ah! a shark bit through his waist:  
His heart's blood dyed the main!

He shriek'd! his half sprung from the wave,  
Streaming with purple gore,  
And soon it found a living grave,  
And, ah! was seen no more.

—James Grainger, “Bryan and Pereene”<sup>6</sup>

The most efficient way to study humor is to study unintentional humor of the sort the Duchess of Newcastle specialized in. The above verses, part of a ballad by James Grainger about two lovers, break through the humor barrier with the too-sudden disaster: one moment, a blissful reunion, the next moment, a shark bites the hero in two. This violent contrast would be enough to tickle us, but then, moments later, the author draws attention to the fact that the hero has been bisected (“his half sprung from the wave”). We do not crave this exactitude in a lover's ballad. This line is difficult to interpret, for we know from the shriek that it is the top half of Bryan that is left over, yet the verb “spring” suggests that the hero—now separated from his legs, remember—has nimbly leaped up out

of the water. The author might have explained this, but he appears to have been in a terrific hurry, for he allows only another four lines for the heroine to pine away, die, and be buried. If you applied this time-line to the history of the earth, the eggs you had for breakfast might have been laid by pterodactyls moments before you dropped them into the frying pan.

It would be easy enough to get rid of the unintended humor: the poem needs to be substantially longer, and the shark must not be allowed to come out of nowhere. A more patient versifier would have put in a warning early on, which the hero would have ignored, as doomed heroes always do. But then a more patient versifier would not eke out his lines with exclamations just to make the scansion work: “When, ah! a shark bit through his waist...”



O Moon, when I gaze on thy beautiful face,  
Careering along through the boundaries of space,  
The thought has often come into my mind  
If I ever shall see thy glorious behind.<sup>A</sup>

—A Housemaid Poet<sup>7</sup>

...Surprise naturally arises from Novelty, as Delight and  
Wonder result from Surprise...

—Sir Richard Blackmore, *Essay upon Wit*<sup>8</sup>

Consider the following strophe from Sir Richard Blackmore, like Grainger an eighteenth-century medical doctor:

With teats distended with their milky store,  
Such num’rous lowing herds, before my door,  
Their painful burden to unload did meet,  
That we with butter might have wash’d our feet.<sup>9</sup>

Here Blackmore seems not to have understood the implications of his

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A. Call me suspicious, but this verse, unlike the others in this chapter, looks more deliberately funny than not. Lewis and Lee do not give a source.

choice of subjects, thereby creating a contrast that has moved eastward along our continuum past the merely vivid to the funny. If you write about cows, your reader anticipates a bucolic style—*bucolic* comes from a Greek word meaning *cowherder*—and in fact Blackmore does nothing in the first three lines to disabuse us of this expectation. We expect, then, a heightened, serious style that might débouché in some sort of earnest but comfortable moral or platitude. Something that compares the cows, eager to be relieved of their milk, to the condition of man, or even the relation of God to man. Probably even the greatest of poets could not make much of so unpromising a subject as distended cow-teats. But Blackmore's image collapses entirely when he can think of nothing more dignified to do with milk than to churn it into butter and use it to lather up one's feet. The herd of cows has too stately a literary tradition to incorporate foot-washing into it at all, and most of us in any case seldom if ever lave our feet with Grade-A, let alone with butter. The result is an excess of contrast: that is, humor. We may think of this as a kind of unintentional revving up of the engine of vividness—contrast—beyond the red line on the tachometer.

A poet more alert to our literary tradition would have avoided feet entirely, at least as objects involving cleansing, care, or indisposition. Eyes, cheeks, foreheads, calves, breasts, hands, and hair all thrive in verse, but feet, backsides, and nose-hairs do not. And yet the odd poet cannot accept this without experiment, as we see in the following verse by Robert Lytton entitled "The Pedlar":

His cheek was worn; his back bent double  
Beneath the iron box he bore;  
And in his walk there seem'd such trouble  
You saw his feet were sore.<sup>10</sup>

The author gives us no hint that he intends to move from poetically authorized body parts—cheek and back—to unauthorized ones, and he thereby redlines his verse, going beyond the vivid to the humorous. Sore feet are too vivid—hence funny—here because we have not allowed them into our tradition of serious verse. Reading "The Pedlar" is like watching dancers switch without warning from a stately minuet to a duckwalk.

Back to James Grainger, whose poem *The Sugar-Cane* has similar problems:

Of composts shall the Muse disdain to sing?

Nor soil her heavenly plumes? The sacred Muse  
Nought sordid deems, but what is base; nought fair,  
Unless true Virtue stamp it with her seal.  
Then, planter, wouldst thou double thine estate,  
Never, ah! never be asham'd to tread  
Thy dung-heaps.<sup>11</sup>

The reader may feel an overwhelming compulsion to correct Grainger and urge that the muse does in fact disdain to sing of composts, and for the best of reasons. The issue has nothing to do with the value of dung but only with where we expect to find it. We value it in our roses, abhor it in our verses. Few writers could put classical allusions, a stately verse form, and dung together without creating a level of contrast appropriate only to humor.<sup>B</sup> The archaisms, the apostrophe to the imaginary reader—we associate these with sentiment, not excrement. And note how Grainger's muse gets a good running start at the end, preparing to launch herself heavenward, only to trip over two squat Anglo-Saxon monosyllables. This is not unlike Rutherford, in the poem at the beginning of this chapter, whipping up an omelet of human grace and beauty.

It must be stressed that the issue is the unacceptable level of contrast, and that contrast diminishes with exposure. If our literary tradition had crept up unawares on cow-teats, sore feet, and dung, these would not have had it in their power to startle us into laughter. Then Thomas Gray might have written an elegy on a compost heap, and Pope might have authored an ode to crud.

It will be seen that unintended humor can occur wherever contrast can somehow be made excessive. One way this commonly happens is that someone unfamiliar with art goes into an art gallery and sees his first Salvador Dali. He may think of "art" as the velvet picture of Elvis in his living room, and when he sees a landscape with giant watches that have melted and dripped like Velveeta on a hamburger patty, the contrast between the two notions of art forces laughter. Art critics, on the other hand, may be baffled and irritated by this response: for them Dali is too familiar to be funny—may indeed be too familiar even to be vivid. Thus

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B. Classicists will point out, however, that Homer managed this nicely in the story of Argos, Odysseus's dog, in Book XVII of the *Odyssey*.



the public may react to a single work of art first with laughter (when the work is too new, too contrastive), then with interest, then with boredom. If the public itself were not constantly changing, as inexperienced minds replace experienced ones, the pace of change in art would presumably be far greater than it is.

Think about what this implies for criticism in general. It is probably impossible for a book critic to react to a novel in a way that is relevant to someone who doesn't read much. That reader may be charmed and delighted by the most hackneyed plot and merely confused by the author who brilliantly parodies a tradition the reader is unfamiliar with.

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If humor depends on high contrast, it will be seen that it is inevitably culture-bound, for there is no guarantee that, from one culture to the next, any two subjects will be sufficiently contrastive to generate laughter. Because of this, what we see as unintentional humor from past ages may not have been humorous at all when it was created. As styles and forms (such as the verses I've cited) fall into disuse, they become unfamiliar to the (current) reader; as they become unfamiliar, they gain in contrast. A verse from the past could be redlined if the reader lacked familiarity with the tradition, or if his or her own tradition had banned from poetry something once allowed into it. Now that love poetry has gone out of style, the love poetry of past ages seems overdone to us. A teenage student may laugh at earlier love poetry that his or her teacher—familiar with the tradition—does not think funny. Still, some things haven't changed: Boswell reports that the audience laughed when Grainger began a verse with the words, "Now, Muse, let's sing of rats..."<sup>12</sup>

Humor has to startle, which is why you kill and gut a joke when you explain it. And when humor fails, this is often because one of its forms of coherence does not convince us. Consider the following two jokes:

1) *God*: Adam, I have some good news and some bad news. Which do you want first?

*Adam*: Oh, wow. I guess the good news.

*God*: The good news is that I'm giving you both a brain and a penis.

*Adam*: Outstanding! But what's the bad news?

*God*: The bad news is I didn't give you enough blood to supply both of them at once.

2) *Question:* How many feminists does it take to screw in a light-bulb?

*Answer:* That's not funny.

These two jokes are either funny or not, depending on whether you accept the real-world assumptions behind them. The real-world assumption, or line of coherence, in the first one is that men don't use their heads where sex is involved. If this did not seem to you true, or at least commonly accepted, the joke could not be funny, because instead of *gaining* coherence with the punch line, which accounts for why men are the way they are, it would actually *lose* coherence. Like many jokes, it forces the mind into overdrive to catch up with the point.

The second joke is even more precarious, because if you are not familiar with the genre of light bulb jokes, the joke doesn't even make sense. It depends on your having heard jokes such as the following:

*Question:* How many therapists does it take to change a light bulb?

*Answer:* Only one, but the light bulb has to really *want* to change.

The real-world assumption in the feminist joke is that feminists are truculent and lack a sense of humor. Accept this assumption for the sake of argument. Then it will be obvious that the answer to the question is both unexpected and yet logical: unexpected because these jokes generally end with an explanation, not an interruption; logical because the stereotypical feminist—completely lacking in humor, remember—could be imagined to respond in just this way. The logic of the joke tradition is proceeding nicely in one direction when it is blindsided by the logic of the “real world.” The combination of coherence with high contrast makes us laugh. But if we did not think of feminists as humorless, the “real world” logic would be without content, hence unable to contrast with the logic of the joke tradition. (In that case, oddly enough, the punch line would still be “true,” but it would express a specific rather than a generic truth—the truth that this particular joke is not funny.) Similarly, if we did not know the usual form of these jokes—as a foreigner might not—then both question and answer would be merely baffling. Two lines of recognized coherence must be present for contrast between them to be possible; neither, naturally enough, can be incoherent.

Often the contrast of the two lines of coherence is very simple and obvious:

Three women applied for a job as secretary, and all three were given the same multiple-choice question:

“If you found that your pay-check was made out for five hundred dollars too much, would you:

- a. Tell your boss and give him back the money.
- b. Wait and see whether anyone noticed.
- c. Spend the money immediately without thought for the consequences.”

Each of the three gave a different answer. Which one got the job?

*Answer:* the one with the biggest boobs.

Here the listener is enticed into a line of logic that supposes that bosses want honest employees, then blindsided by a line of logic that, like the joke about Adam and God, implies that men subordinate everything to sex. This joke too can be funny only if both lines of logic are persuasive or are common stereotypical views, as they probably are, which suggests that this joke might be funny anywhere in the world. The light-bulb joke, on the other hand, would probably not win you a reputation as a wit in, say, Tehran.

When we say that a culture is lacking in humor, what we are really saying is that it has a different set of lines of coherence from our own, as well as different ideas of what is contrastive, and that therefore its humor is not reliably funny to us. We see variations in contrast even in individual words. The German word *Scheiße* translates into English as *shit* but has a more mellow taboo placed on it, so that it isn't nearly so startling as our word. And consider the following German joke, which I have translated into English in such a literal way as to squeeze all the humor out of it:

Two Bavarians are seated in a restaurant when one of them picks up a saltshaker and tries to sprinkle salt on his food. But the saltshaker is stopped up, so nothing comes out. “Here, let me try it,” says the other, and he too shakes the saltshaker. Again nothing comes out.

Just then a Prussian comes over to their table and asks if he can use their saltshaker. They hand it to him, then watch gleefully to see his reaction when he can't get any salt out of the saltshaker. The Prussian shakes the saltshaker; nothing comes out. But then he looks at it

closely, reaches for a toothpick, and clears out the holes in the lid. Then he sprinkles salt on his food.

The two Bavarians look at each other. One of them shrugs his shoulders. “It’s just that they’re ahead of us in technology.”

Part of the trouble with this joke is that the German punch line (“die sind uns halt im Technischen voraus”) doesn’t translate very well. We would do better to make one up that gives the sense of the original without being literal—something like, “Hey, what can I say? They’ve just got a lock on high technology.” Then the contrast between the trivial solution and the heightened rhetoric would become clearer. But the joke also breaks down in English because it lacks the German contrast between the stereotypes of the Prussians (efficient, humorless) and the Bavarians (laid-back, inefficient, droll). A German would not try to tell this joke the other way around. (From across the ocean, Americans tend to apply the Prussian stereotype to all Germans, when they think of Germans at all.) In German, moreover, you can use the dialects of the two stereotypes to generate humor. All dialects have great potential for humor because of their contrast with other dialects and with the “standard language” of their culture.<sup>C</sup>

It is not unfair to say that comics would have a hard life without dialects and funny voices. A few years ago I went to a cabaret performance, at the Goethe Institute in Los Angeles, by two comics from Leipzig. The house was packed—largely, perhaps, because for most of us it was our first chance to hear comics from what used to be East Germany.

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C. In Germany the standard language—the dialect chosen to serve as a *lingua franca* in the country—is High German, a dialect culled from the higher parts of Germany, nearer the Alps and away from the Lowlands; in England it is R. P., or “received pronunciation”; in America, Standard General American. The standard languages in England, Germany, and France unify both grammar and pronunciation. Not so in the U.S., where the standard language unifies only the grammar. This is why your dictionary doesn’t tell you how to pronounce a word but only what word to copy when you pronounce the word. That is, if you look up the words *dog* and *bog*, it tells you to say the first with the vowel you use in *soft* and the second with the one you use in *odd*. Thus, if these two vowels are the same in your dialect—as they are in mine, a vowel-impoverished Western dialect—the words rhyme; but if they are different, as in my wife’s, *dog* and *bog* not only do not rhyme but are consistently sorted out. Jokes dependant on homonyms in the Western American dialect may thus fall flat in, say, New England, where many more distinctions are maintained.

But the audience consisted of speakers of German who were not necessarily familiar with Saxon dialect—and dialects in Germany are far more strongly differentiated than any U.S. dialects. This presented the performers with a predicament: if they used straight Saxon dialect, they would lose those of us unfamiliar with the language. If they used straight High German, they would sacrifice the vividness of the less familiar local dialect.

They compromised by speaking an improvised combination of the two languages, in which the Saxon supplied the accent and any words close enough to the known to be intelligible, and the High German provided everything else. At the end, one of the performers came to the front of the stage and asked, “Wie hat Ihnen unser Hochdeutsch gefallen?” [“How did you like our High German?”] And the audience laughed because what they had heard had been as different from High German as was compatible with intelligibility.

The performers then told a few jokes in straight Saxon, but they introduced them by giving a brief account of the circumstances in High German, so that the audience was able to interpret the dialect. In High German: “At the beginning of this century, when they put in the trolley cars, people weren’t quite sure what to think.” In Saxon: “And one day a woman came up to the tracks and didn’t seem to want to cross them. She walked this way and that, and finally she approached a policeman and asked, ‘Will I be electrocuted if I step on the track?’ And the policeman answered, ‘Not unless you touch your other leg to the cable overhead.’” We all laughed uproariously at this.

The reader must surely be thinking, “I guess you had to be there.” Like the other jokes we’ve looked at, this one combines two inconsistent forms of coherence, the logical and the “real world,” which are at odds with each other. Logically, what the policeman says is true; in actuality, it is impossible. But the reason the joke did not amuse you is that, by being put into standard English, it has suffered a fatal diminution of contrast (in this case, the contrast between the dialect and the audience’s standard language). We’ve been quite unfair to this joke: it won’t do to say that a dialect joke “isn’t funny” after we’ve destroyed it by removing the dialect. That’s like breaking the leg of a racehorse, then arguing that the horse doesn’t really run all that fast.

The vividness provided by an unfamiliar dialect, or accent, is most obvious in stand-up comedy and in cartoons. Cartoon characters, such as Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd, are highly differentiated from each other—they are not even of the same species. And they are given peculiar accents found nowhere else on earth. Now, if you are an adult, you probably no longer find them funny anyway, merely because “funny” has something to do with extreme forms of contrast, and contrast disintegrates with exposure, like Dracula in the sunlight.<sup>D</sup>

Stand-up comics understand that local dialect is a powerful source of contrast. If you create high-contrast accents, you are already four-fifths of the way toward a joke. Living in California, I sometimes go months on end without hearing “valley girl” dialect, even if it is never farther away than the nearest mall. I virtually never hear “surfer”—in fact, I can’t remember ever having been addressed as “dude.” Yet the stand-up comics on television routinely treat these dialects as characteristic of California, especially when they themselves are from New York and can contrast the most extreme forms of their language with the most extreme forms of ours. In the comic view, Californians are laid back, New Yorkers are abrupt; Californians are out of it, drugged up, or, if female, gorgeous and ditsy, while New Yorkers are intense, direct, and rude. Californians live in Hollywood, Venice or San Francisco; New Yorkers in Brooklyn or the Bronx. The New York policemen are all-forgiving, the Californians sticklers for detail. New York police accept gratuities, California police report you for bribes. The Deep South, on the other hand, is peopled largely by men with two first names (e.g., “Billy Bob”) who are suspicious of foreigners, and foreign territory begins at the outskirts of the small towns they all live in. Southern women are different from the women of

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D. For the sake of coherence, fictional characters have to be much more of a piece than real people. For the sake of contrast, they have to be much more strong-willed than real people. And humorous fictional characters—humor being especially high in contrast—are on average far more strong-willed than non-humorous ones. This is one reason why the *idée fixe* is so common among characters intended to be funny. Elmer Fudd doesn’t even notice that, in trying to protect his carrot patch from Bugs Bunny, he lets his house be destroyed. Another reason for the *idée fixe* is that it automatically creates a line of coherence—in this case, something that the audience knows always to expect—that can run afoul of other lines of coherence.

California: gorgeous, manipulative, and catty, rather than gorgeous and ditsy.

These stereotypes, and the extreme contrasts they allow, are what prop up stand-up comedy. Audience and comic, then, form a secret pact stating that, for purposes of comedy only, all stereotypes may be treated as true, even if they are actually the very opposite of the truth. Italian men are sexist, blacks are thieves, Latinos are lazy, and gays simper. Comics don't invent the stereotypes, of course; they just mine them for their contrastive potential. And if we know the stereotype is untrue, in a comic setting we pretend that it's true in order to let the joke work. In southern California, the "lazy Latino" stereotype survives for comic purposes even though people here routinely hire Hispanic illegal aliens whenever they need to have really hard work done.

For humor, the most effective stereotypes are precisely those that are off-limits to the audience. Therefore, the comic roots around in all the things that are not supposed to be said: taboos are particularly contrastive because they are not supposed to be brought up at all. When we listen to a joke like the one about Dopey and the penguin, we compromise between our taboos and our taste for good dirty fun. Just now, since corporal punishment has become taboo, stage comics speak approvingly of beating children. When the king puts up with the jester saying things no one else dares to say, it is because the alternative is to do without humor.

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Novelists too mine dialect and other forms of distinctive language for their vividness. But because, in diction, newness always comes at the expense of meaning, the more opaque a dialect is, the more it slows the reader down. One publisher of westerns says, "Though it is important for flavor and authenticity to use some westernisms in dialogue ('pardner' and the dropping of the final 'g' in present participles, for example), overuse of dialect is to be avoided; it slows down the reader's pace and, as a result, the narrative pace too."<sup>13</sup>

One narrative solution is to give the speaker of dialect a fairly small part, so as not to make too great a demand on the reader's attention. If the heroine chats with the gardener, the one might speak standard English, the other dialect, as in *The Secret Garden*. Then the standard-English half of the conversation throws light on the dialect half. Another solution is to

use a dilute form of dialect. In *Irrungen Wirrungen*, Theodor Fontane causes Lene, the heroine, to speak High German even when in conversation with Frau Dörr, who in turn does not speak straight Berlin dialect but a very mild form of it. Fontane would probably have thought it comical to make his (lower-class) heroine speak dialect, even though in “real life” she surely would have, and Frau Dörr, who is intended as a comic figure, and therefore a natural for dialect, isn’t allowed undiluted “Berlinsch” because readers from other German provinces would get bogged down in it.

We think that when writers allow only their comic characters to use dialect, this is because of the writer’s (and the audience’s) social prejudices; but if this were so, then why is it that even the writers who are prejudiced *in favor* of the “lower classes” are cautious about their use of dialect? Fontane shows no signs whatever of class prejudice in *Irrungen Wirrungen*; indeed, it is class prejudice that is the *villain* in the novel—that is what forces Lene and Botho apart. Yet he causes Lene, a native Berliner, to speak High German, without even a touch of dialect.

This should tip us off to the real issue. We know that extreme contrast is essential to humor, but we don’t give sufficient attention to the converse: where there is extreme contrast, humor is apt to appear willy-nilly. It is not just the “upper classes” that laugh at the speech of the “lower classes”; all people laugh at speech radically different from their own, and not necessarily out of wickedness. But if this is so, then the novelist puts a character at risk by causing him or her to speak in dialect in serious scenes. If the reader speaks a dialect different from that of the characters, there is a serious risk of unintended humor.



She would have to frame some stinging rejoinder which would ‘escape her’ when next Elizabeth used that stale old phrase: it would have to be short, swift and spontaneous, and therefore required careful thought.

—E. F. Benson, *Miss Mapp* <sup>14</sup>



In an earlier chapter I mentioned two seemingly unrelated ways of creating humorous characters: you make them either insincere, so that they say one thing and do another, or obsessive, so that they say or do the same things even when the circumstances change. If we keep in mind the constituents of humor, it will be seen that both methods actually do the same thing: they create high contrast and conflicting forms of coherence. The utterances of the insincere character are usually opposite to his or her actual thoughts, and the utterance is appropriate to the situation while the thoughts are appropriate to the character. The other version—the obsessive character who always says or does the same thing—is similarly consistent: the character’s remarks are contrastive in proportion to their inappropriateness, yet both the remarks and the circumstances arise out of some form of coherence, whether “real life,” logic, or character. Thus Sheldon Cooper, in *The Big Bang Theory*, cannot just knock on Penny’s door: he has to knock three times, say “Penny,” and then repeat this sequence two more times. Anything that interrupts this procedure may cause him to repeat it. Unvaried, this wouldn’t be funny for very long, but the possibilities for laughs are in direct proportion to the inventiveness of the writers, and they are very inventive indeed.

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But let us end with one last example from *The Stuffed Owl*. In their introduction, Lewis and Lee distinguish between ordinary bad poets and good bad poets. The former hurt your ears and vex your spirit; the latter show you new dimensions of the human imagination. In short, it takes great talent to write verse so bad that it lasts through the ages. And this is what James Grainger has done in a wonderful poem in which he brings together classical wood-nymphs and some kind of plant-louse:

And pity the poor planter, when the blast,  
 Fell plague of heaven! perdition of the isles!  
 Attacks his waving gold. Though well-manur’d;  
 A richness though thy fields from Nature boast;  
 Though seasons pour; this pestilence invades:  
 Too oft it seizes the glad infant throng,  
 Nor pities their green nonage: their broad blades,  
 Of which the graceful wood-nymphs erst compos’d  
 The greenest garlands to adorn their brows,

First pallid, sickly, dry, and wither'd show;  
Unseemly stains succeed; which, nearer view'd  
By microscopic arts, small eggs appear,  
Dire fraught with reptile life; alas, too soon  
They burst their filmy gaol, and crawl abroad,  
Bugs of uncommon shape.<sup>15</sup>

The reader will have noticed that, lacking Grainger's genius at turning a phrase, I altered his last line to create my title. My wife and I had got in the habit of quoting this line whenever the subject of bugs came up. And it came up one day when I suddenly heard a slap not much louder than the report of a medium-bore rifle.

"What was *that*?" I asked.

"A bug," she said.

"A bug of uncommon shape?" I asked.

She rolled the bug down her sleeve and flipped it onto the floor.

"It is now."



#### References:

1. Wilde, 64.
2. Lewis and Lee, 28.
3. Lewis and Lee, 28-29.
4. See, for example, Haig, 9-31, for a review of theories of humor.
5. Hazlitt, 7.
6. Lewis and Lee, 89.
7. Lewis and Lee, 12.
8. Blackmore, 193.
9. Lewis and Lee, 42.
10. Lewis and Lee, 9.
11. Lewis and Lee, 91.
12. Lewis and Lee, 87.
13. Writer's guidelines for *Avalon Books*.
14. Benson, *Miss Mapp*, 128.
15. Lewis and Lee, 90.

## Chapter Fifteen

### Muggles, Hobbits, and Meaningful Ghosts

Fiction is certainly easier for a writer when he or she has nothing against bringing large numbers of characters together and letting them talk freely. But as we have seen, thematic issues often interfere with this plan, especially in romantic fiction, where the whole point is that the character be isolated. Modern writers, however, can take advantage of a sturdy literary tradition that has wrestled with these problems with considerable success.

And then there are always a few masters of story-telling who don't seem to need much help from anyone.

Some years ago, at a dinner at Caltech, I found myself sitting next to two highly intelligent ladies engaged in an enthusiastic chat about the Harry Potter novels. "Have you read them?" one asked me.

"Ummm," I said, buying time. "I thought that was children's literature."

"Oh, no. It's much more than that."

Two days later, on a very busy day, one of them handed me a package. "It's a present," she said. I did not get a chance to open my present for a couple of hours, and during that time it never occurred to me that it would turn out to be a Harry Potter novel. I was so touched by the gesture that I read the novel.

Technically, I suppose, it *is* children's literature, but written by a highly intelligent writer who has provided sustenance for jaded adults as well. And her decisions are exceptional. Consider just her methods of dealing with the problems we've considered in this book:

**Venue:** Best if it allows for large numbers of highly differentiated characters. Rowling has chosen a school, like countless other novelists, which allows for the creation of bundles of characters differentiated by experience, age, power, expertise, etc. But she hasn't lost sight of another rule firmly grounded in our cognition:

**Newness:** Everything has to be made new while remaining familiar. So Rowling renews “school” as a subject by positing the notion that if there are wizards, why then there must be schools for wizards! This means that the terrain is familiar but the details are all new. Entering Hogwarts is like visiting Australia and discovering that, while there are still hills and streams and such, the plants and animals are all different. A gong awakens you in the morning and you’re informed that you just heard a Bellbird. And Rowling dusts off a technique common in science fiction: introducing a new world by causing the main character to visit it for the first time, so that the other characters explain it to him, thereby avoiding lengthy exposition. Among the many forms of contrast here is that between the naïf and those in the know.

**Fantasies:** For fiction to be popular, it has to plug in to popular fantasies. Here Rowling has done some exceptional things. Recall how Superman and Spiderman both have a second persona that not only allows for more complex plot twists that would otherwise occur but also enables a self-pitying grandiosity: “If they only knew who they’re dealing with.” Rowling has reversed this: it’s not Harry Potter who knows that he’s really a superhero, it’s everyone else. Potter himself doesn’t know that he is really exceptional. So he looks and acts like an insecure geek but plays a masterful game of Quidditch. It is as if an NFL quarterback had a day job where youngsters bullied him and his colleagues sent him out to fetch coffee.

**Stereotypes:** As always, the differentiation of characters leads toward stereotypes: Potter as geek, Hermione as overachiever, Malfoy (an allegorical name: “bad faith”) as the envious leader of a small gang, with political connections. But all these characters are firmly grounded not only in the demands of rhetoric—they have to be differentiated if drama is to occur—but in our experience as well. There actually are geeks, overachievers, and thugs in the average school. Which means that Rowling’s characters meet our requirements for coherence as well as contrast.

**Plotting types:** The longer the story, the more important plot becomes and the more certain it becomes that the author will use both major forms of plotting. Let’s consider just plotting by revelation, where we see in Rowling a kind of arms race between author and reader. After a

lifetime of studying plot, I am in the habit of always asking, at every turn in a plot, where the story could possibly be going. Knowing that the villain has to be a figure familiar to the reader (it is a violation of coherence if he isn't), I keep a sharp eye on any character marked by a lack of suspicious behavior, especially if he or she is always close to the major events of the story. Rowling, however, knows this about me, so she sometimes causes suspiciously nice characters to turn out really to be good guys, as with Professor Lupin in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*. He does have a terrible secret: he is a closet werewolf (hence his allegorical name: *Lupin* from Lat. *lupus* "wolf"). But he is a kind, well-meaning werewolf who absents himself from potential victims during his transformations. And all his details make sense in retrospect, including his mysterious disappearances, which protect potential victims from him, which means that the revelation renews him as a character with no loss of coherence.

**Isolating characters:** The Harry Potter novels are romantic in the extreme: the individual treated as an isolate in a world that doesn't appreciate him. Its basic fantasies appear to derive from the reader's sense of him/herself as alone and misunderstood, which is why Harry Potter spends his summers being mistreated by his "normal" relatives. There are other places Harry Potter could spend his summers (he has a standing invitation at the Weasleys, for example), but none of those would cause the superhero to be treated badly by bossy relatives, so the narrator grimly puts him down where he will suffer the most humiliation. It is the Clark Kent version of Superman all over again, fueled by the fantasies of readers convinced that they must have been dropped into an earth-bound cradle by aliens.

As we have seen, in romanticism the demands of theme clash with the demands of storytelling, so that it is precisely the "Lone" Ranger who has to have a faithful companion. And if the reader's isolation is at issue, then his fantasy-life sees friendship as the ultimate good and betrayal as the ultimate evil. This leads to the paradox that the romantic hero, while emotionally isolated, may have very good friends. In Rowling's novels, we see an extreme version of this: Harry Potter has a whole band of sidekicks, all highly differentiated from one another. Among Rowling's many impressive achievements is her ability to create the powerful impression that her hero is tumbled about, profoundly alone, in a

dangerous world, even though his landscape is littered with close friends and he himself has greater powers than anyone else, even the villain.

This brings us back to the dilemma of superpowers. And here is one of the areas where Rowling's imagination has triumphed. Like the creators of *Superman*, she understands that her hero must have superpowers to satisfy the fantasies of her readers, yet if he is too powerful, then he can't be successfully threatened. Again, thematic and narrative exigencies are at each others' throats. Rowling's solution to the dilemma is wonderfully appropriate (that is, coherent). Remember: Harry is at a school studying to be a wizard. Among the rules of the school are prohibitions against using the very powers that the students are mastering. And when the students are out in the "normal" world, among the Muggles (that is, people like you and me), they are prohibited from using their powers so that the Muggles won't notice them. This is why Harry, forced to spend his summers with his vile relatives, can't simply change them into cockroaches and crunch them underfoot. The reader may wonder why it would be terrible if the Muggles *did* notice the Wizards—after all, the Wizards have far greater powers than the Muggles—but finally readers know that, as a condition of being entertained, they have to accept anything the author posits as an initial condition. The real answer to the question, of course, is that the possibilities of drama would be diminished if the Wizards didn't have to conceal their doings from the Muggles. So a group of youths get in trouble for taking a car out without permission—nothing new and surprising there—but it is a flying car. This violates the same rules as the ones you grew up with, but with a twist that creates a new and dramatic scene.

It must be stressed that Rowling is doing a kind of intricate balancing act as she tries to create a superhero who doesn't actually look like a superhero, while giving him powers with limitations so that he doesn't solve every problem by simply casting a spell. Is she always successful? Before answering that, we should admit that criticizing Rowling for her plots is a bit like a couch potato noticing that an Olympic gymnast took a little step on her dismount. But I think it could be argued that, in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Rowling loses sight of the rule that the writer has to ease up on the tension from time to time, just to give the reader a rest (and create a different kind of contrast), and that the

denouement becomes a bit incoherent as Rowling lets her amazing imagination have its way in the battle between Harry Potter and Voldemort. When a battle can take new and wonderful forms from moment to moment—not previously seeded in the story—the reader feels that the writer is taking liberties. In Rowling’s case, they are innovative and impressive liberties, of course.

The couch potatoes have had their say with Rowling’s fiction, and I collected large numbers of their reviews off the Internet with an eye toward disemboweling some of them in this chapter. But finally this was just too messy a project—even field-dressing some of those cockroaches from a couple paragraphs back would be more to my taste. The Internet has many wonders, among which is its ability to offer a place for illiterate people to do critiques of people who write brilliantly. Beyond any doubt, Rowling deserves her success, however much it might annoy those of us lacking her talents.

Many of the things she does are things you couldn’t possibly teach a fledgling writer. They require that the author’s imagination go further than that of an ordinary person. For example, anyone who writes about monsters is confronted with the problem of creating a new and memorable monster, one outfitted with horrors different from those of the fictional monsters of the past. You can’t just do a reprise. Bram Stoker would hardly recognize the Dracula of modern movies—it would even come as a surprise to him that Dracula is now killed with a stake rather than with knives. Rowling’s Dementors of Azkaban compete favorably with the sort of thing you see in choice nightmares. In fact, they are so scary that I myself have vowed never to go anywhere near Azkaban.



I wouldn’t mind visiting Middle Earth, though. Like Rowling, Tolkien creates a different world, but one parallel to ours, to satisfy both our demand for newness and our demand for coherence. In *Lord of the Rings*, Middle Earth is inhabited by Hobbits and Wizards and Elves and Dwarves and Orcs and Nazguls and a variety of other creatures sharply differentiated from one another, but it also has a leavening of human beings. And—again like Rowling—Tolkien uses romantic themes, which

cause him considerable inconvenience in his narrative. For example, he sends Frodo out on a journey of cosmic importance: to destroy the forces of evil by conveying a ring, a kind of focal point and potentiator of evil—conveniently sized to fit into an ordinary trouser-pocket—to the distant Mount Doom, a volcano, where he can toss it into a pit of lava and render it harmless.

Given the amount of trouble this will cause, Tolkien anticipates the reader's suggestion that you could of course just melt the thing down in a forge: in an early scene, Gandalf tosses the ring into the hearth fire at Frodo's house, and it doesn't even heat up, proving that anything less than the Mount Doom treatment will just encourage it.

So we have a single, ordinary person, or rather Hobbit, a kind of miniature version of Clark Kent, setting out to save the entire world. Ideally, such a theme would put Frodo completely on his own—much the way Gary Cooper seems to be in *High Noon*—but if he is on his own, the author loses important narrative-tools. And note that Gary Cooper's character may have been on his own, but he certainly wasn't isolated: not only did the entire town disapprove of his effort to eradicate evil, but even his wife was on their side! In *Lord of the Rings*, to keep the story moving, Frodo not only needs people to talk to, but they must be maximally differentiated from him, so as to enable page-by-page drama in between the encounters with his enemies. So Frodo sets off with two companions, one of whom (Sam) is a classic side-kick. And then vast numbers of other characters come and go within the narrative, so that Frodo's route reminds you of the last time you tried to cross a major city at rush-hour. Starting from Frodo's departure in Chapter Three of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien uses at least some dialogue for 44 pages in a row before lapsing for a single page into narrative only.

Like Rowling, Tolkien is keenly aware that a narrative can run dry if not supplied with an abundance of dramatic possibilities, and he comes up with some remarkable solutions to the problems we have discussed. For example, he eventually realizes that he will have even greater possibilities of drama if he actually invites one of the villains along on the Quest. That would be Sméagol, also known as Gollum. Now Sméagol/Gollum is so vile and slippery and untrustworthy that Tolkien has to go to considerable lengths to explain—both to the reader and to a variety of characters in the



story—why Sam isn’t allowed to follow his own inclination to stab him through and through. But narrative exigencies win out: Sméagol is simply too valuable to kill.

What is most striking about Sméagol/Gollum is Tolkien’s thoroughness in making him drama-worthy. Every writer sees the advantage of creating characters who look different and speak differently from one another, but Sméagol must set some kind of new record for differentness. He is primarily aquatic, talks to himself a lot, is slimy and slippery, eats only meat, which must be raw, is afraid of fire, and seldom says anything that couldn’t be classified as a whimper, a whine, or a fierce expression of his resentments. Because he can’t very well speak a language the reader doesn’t understand, Tolkien causes him to speak a distinctive English: Sméagol always speaks of himself in either the first-person plural or the third-person singular, and when he uses first-person plural, he may put on the third-person singular ending: “What’s the hobbit going to do with it, we wonders, yes we wonders.”<sup>1</sup> But while the grammatical jumble here does create a distinctive language, Tolkien gives it another function, a far more important one. Consider the following passages:

“No, I will not take it [the rope] off you,” said Frodo, “not unless”—he paused a moment in thought—“not unless there is any promise you can make that I can trust.”

“We will swear to do what he wants, yes, yess,” said Gollum, still twisting and grabbing at his ankle. “It hurts us.”

“Swear?” said Frodo.

“Sméagol,” said Gollum suddenly and clearly, opening his eyes wide and staring at Frodo with a strange light. “Sméagol will swear on the Precious.”<sup>2</sup>

Two pages later, Sam reminds Sméagol of his promise, whereupon the promise is reiterated:

“No, no!” said Gollum. “Sméagol promised.”

But of course since it was Sméagol who promised, Gollum—Sméagol’s other half—does not consider himself bound by the promise: hence the manipulation of the grammar. Both Sméagol and Gollum use the first-person plural when speaking of anything they both agree on—but each uses the third-person singular when speaking of the views of the other.

In real life, split personalities are uncommon; in fiction, they abound. As always, it is best if they are maximally differentiated. Sam reduces Sméagol's two names to "Slinker" and "Stinker"—another tip-off that Sméagol really is two different characters. Tolkien causes his character to talk to himself because in that way the drama between Sméagol and Gollum can be externalized. It won't do to have characters merely be different and think different thoughts: the differentness must emerge into the outer world if it is to become drama. So Sméagol and Gollum not only get into an argument with each other, each taking turns using the vocal chords of their common body, but Sam, their implacable enemy, is allowed to eavesdrop on their argument. Thus we are presented with three inimical points of view at once.

The movie-version had an easier time of it: here there was no need for Sam, since the differentness between Sméagol and Gollum could be made visible—the one tormented while trying to do the right thing, the other purely evil. With the sound off, my wife and I could easily tell which was which just from the body language and expressions, but just in case, the director had the actor pose differently, so that the camera angle alternately shifted from one alter ego to the other.



This technique of Tolkien's—splitting Sméagol into two parts and then letting them get into an argument with each other—was used as an organizing principle for an entire novel in the nineteenth century. I first read that novel, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, when I was in high school, and even though it was obvious to me that I didn't understand it very well, I liked it very much.

The next time I read it, I had a newly minted Ph.D. in literature from a major university and was teaching at another major university in a large team-taught course in European literature. The lecturer was excellent, even brilliant, and I had complete confidence in his ability to make sense of *Crime and Punishment* for me, so that I could make sense of it for my discussion section.

To my astonishment, not only was the lecturer no help, my brand-new Ph.D. wasn't much help either. In fact, now that I had three degrees

in literature, I actually found *Crime and Punishment* more difficult than I had as a teenager. This was because I could now see that Dostoevsky apparently violates some of the simplest and most obvious rules for the writing of fiction. One of these rules is that the writer can't make his/her task easier by simply bringing characters together by coincidence. This violates our sense of coherence: we expect order in fiction, if only because we don't get it in real life. Yet Dostoevsky seems to use coincidence *constantly* in *Crime and Punishment*.

Many critics have set Dostoevsky straight in this matter, but I will cite only two particularly thoughtful ones:

Coincidence is an ever-present trap for weary novelists, and in this respect Dostoevsky nodded rather frequently in *Crime and Punishment*. It is perhaps the principal artistic blemish in the work.<sup>3</sup>

The fact is that no coincidence copied from life can make in the least plausible the kind of coincidences, even the minor ones, you find in *Crime and Punishment*, such as the prosperous and respectable bourgeois Luzhin turning up in the same slum-lodging with the starving Marmeladov family or Svidrigaylov, a rich man, finding no better place to stay in Petersburg than in the very same house where Sonya lives, a house in which his flat adjoins the room where she practices her trade and conducts those incredible conversations with Raskolnikov upon which he eavesdrops with the greatest relish.<sup>4</sup>

But Dostoevsky's narrative crime in fact is much worse than this: one critic points out—and this is certainly seems true—that Dostoevsky uses coincidences when he doesn't even have to!<sup>5</sup>

And if you were listing Dostoevsky's "errors" of composition, the coincidences wouldn't even come close in importance to the mess he makes of Part Five of the novel. His story, which is about a student, Raskolnikov, who has committed two murders, suddenly lists sideways and all but founders as the narrator focuses on a character who has already been written out of the story, the ex-fiancé of Raskolnikov's sister. In other words, the hero's ex-brother-in-law-to-be. That character, Luzhin, decides to get revenge on Raskolnikov, whom he blames for the end of his engagement, and if you have ever read more than even one or two novels,

you might think that Luzhin will do this by, say, attacking him somehow. He might try to kill him, have him beat up, spread lies about him.

But no! Luzhin instead decides to gain revenge on Raskolnikov by making someone else look bad! So who will Luzhin victimize? Raskolnikov's angelic sister? Raskolnikov's mother? No: a recent acquaintance of Raskolnikov's, the prostitute Sonya! In other words, Dostoevsky chooses to have Luzhin try to destroy the reputation of someone who doesn't even have a reputation. This now becomes the central event in the story—a story, may I remind you, ostensibly about someone who has committed two murders! And not only has Luzhin now become central to the story, but his betrayal will be discovered when a guy with poor eyesight miraculously acquires vision just in time to prevent our heroine Sonia from being schlepped off by the police.

Here again an excellent critic has backed us up in this criticism of Dostoevsky:

In general, Luzhin's role in the novel strikes us as unessential, as a mere accessory in the plotting of the intrigue. The larger significance that Dostoevsky seemed at first to reserve for him disappeared as the narrative lines in which he is important faded away in the process of writing."<sup>6</sup>

And the Epilogue! It just seems to be tacked on to the novel. According to one critic, "Thematically, the epilogue is superfluous to the novel; it only tidies up loose ends."<sup>7</sup> What was Dostoevsky thinking?

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The brilliant Vladimir Nabokov loathed Dostoevsky, as you see from his summary of *Crime and Punishment*:

In *Crime and Punishment* Raskolnikov for some reason or other kills an old female pawnbroker and her sister. Justice in the shape of an inexorable police officer closes slowly in on him until in the end he is driven to a public confession, and through the love of a noble prostitute he is brought to a spiritual regeneration that did not seem as incredibly banal in 1866 when the book was written as it does now when noble prostitutes are apt to be received a little cynically by experienced readers.<sup>8</sup>

Stated thus, the plot of *Crime and Punishment* seems almost childishly incompetent. And yet we keep reading it. This leaves us with a

conundrum: how can an incompetent novelist write a novel that is still widely read a century and a half after he wrote it?

The answer lies in the observation that *Crime and Punishment* is actually two novels, one literal, the other allegorical. Many of the events work for both the literal and the allegorical story (Raskolnikov's two murders, for example), but whenever the two stories come into conflict, Dostoevsky favors the metaphorical story. *That* is what he views as important. Part Five is the parting of the ways: there the metaphorical story slaps the juice out of the literal story. But if you focus on the right version, Part Five is an unparalleled triumph of original storytelling instead of a clumsy melodrama.

Two important questions come up: why does Dostoevsky build a split-level novel and how do we know that this is what he is doing? As we shall see, the answer to the second question is very simple: Dostoevsky tells us. If we readers don't pay attention, it is because no one else has written novels the way Dostoevsky wrote *Crime and Punishment*, so we act as if Dostoevsky can be read the way you read an adventure novel: what you see is what you get. But in *Crime and Punishment*, it is the story that *shadows* the "real" events that is actually the important part of the novel. It is as if the shadow of a gold coin were even more valuable than the coin itself.

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But why does he do it? Nabokov's ill-tempered summary gives us a hint: the novel is about the spiritual regeneration of the main character. But an epiphany is the most abstract possible subject: it all happens inside someone's head. And you can't have an epiphany duke it out with a fantasy, right?

But this is exactly what Dostoevsky wants to write about: how someone moves from a fragmented mental and emotional condition, driven by fantasies, to a condition of wholeness. An epiphany duking it out with a fantasy. He reasons (as we have in this book) that anything abstract has to be attached to something concrete if it is to be put into a story. So he separates out the aspects of Raskolnikov's mind and incorporates them into different characters. Dostoevsky understood that obvious allegory can become tedious quickly, so although *all* the

characters have metaphorical names,<sup>A</sup> he gives really clear ones to just three characters:

1. “Sonia”: a diminutive for Sophia, the Greek word for “wisdom,” and, in the Christian tradition, “divine wisdom.” It should not come as a surprise that, whenever Sonia arrives on the scene, someone gets wise to himself. With apologies to Vladimir Nabokov: the reason Sonia is a prostitute is that Raskolnikov has prostituted his wisdom. The second time he sees her, he hardly recognizes her. Her improvement is an objective correlative for Raskolnikov’s beginning to use his wisdom appropriately, instead of prostituting it. By the end of the novel, she is no longer a prostitute but a seamstress, a profession that, in this novel, is always associated with spiritual mending.

2. “Razumikhin”: from a Russian word for “reason.” Raskolnikov doesn’t consult his friend Razumikhin until after he has committed the murders—that is, until it is too late for “Reason” to stop him. Before the murders, he had been avoiding Razumikhin/Reason; afterward, Razumikhin barges in and tries to help Raskolnikov get well: “We have to make a human being out of you, after all,” he exclaims.<sup>9</sup> (But in a beautiful gesture, when Sonia—Divine Wisdom— first comes to visit, Razumikhin—Reason—jumps up and stands aside for her.)

3. “Raskolnikov”: from a Russian word for “schism.” That is, Dostoevsky is directing our attention to Raskolnikov’s split personality. The novel is littered with its pieces.

Early in the novel, Raskolnikov kills off two good parts of his mind, represented by the two women he murders, and then the ascendant bad parts of his mind, represented by other concrete characters, have to be killed or removed forcibly for him to recover, which they are, one by one, in the course of the novel.

The bad parts are gone for good, of course, but what about the good

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A. For the sake of coherence, if one character is given an allegorical name, the others should as well, simply because the reader will expect this. Since this can become cumbersome, writers don’t necessarily do this. Dostoevsky seems to have done it in *Crime and Punishment*, although at this late date it isn’t always possible to be certain of the exact allegorical meaning intended for every name. I have coauthored a book (with M. F. Fleming and E. W. Barber) entitled *Two Thoughts with but a Single Mind: Crime and Punishment and the Writing of Fiction*, in which these issues are considered in detail.

parts of his mind, especially the ones he killed? Is he now to go through life with a kind of spiritual lobotomy? Well, Dostoevsky figured this out before we did, and he takes the trouble to revive the parts of Raskolnikov represented by the two women he kills, although critics persist in not noticing. The name of the old murdered pawnbroker is “Aliona” (the name of Dostoevsky’s beloved nurse), which is English Helen[a]; and the name-supplier in question is the Empress Helena, the finder of the true cross (according to Russian orthodoxy).<sup>B</sup> The metaphorical Aliona is revived when a rescued child nicknamed “Lida” (from Lydia)<sup>C</sup> undergoes a name-change, acquiring a diminutive of the name Helena (coherence!). Constance Garnett, who did the first English translation of Dostoevsky, noticed the switch and, assuming that Homer had nodded, changed the name back. But if Dostoevsky just couldn’t remember what he named his character, then why does Porfirii “mistakenly” mention going to a name-day ceremony when none such was scheduled? Homer nodded *twice*? Surely the point of Porfirii’s “mistake” is to announce that the metaphorical Aliona has been reborn.

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But now let us get back to where the story of *Crime and Punishment* seems to lurch sideways. In the metaphorical story, as opposed to the (inferior) literal one, the spurned suitor Luzhin represents Raskolnikov’s “Rational Egoism,” or selfishness: no surprise that this element/character comes into conflict with Divine Wisdom. The two fight with different weapons: Egoism—obsessed with appearances—fights by trying to make Divine Wisdom look bad, whereas Divine Wisdom fights by instilling wisdom into the pieces of Raskolnikov’s mind. The half-blind

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B. Readers are welcome to argue with Aliona = St. Helena, but when they do, they should be prepared to explain how it is that, in Orthodox hagiographies, the story of St. Helena provides so many names that Dostoevsky used in *Crime and Punishment*: Porfirii, Arkadii, Procopius, Eudokia, Ilia [Elijah], and Pulcheria.

C. This is surely the Lydia of Acts 16:14-15, a “seller of Porphyry” (purple) who undergoes a conversion. The character Porfirii’s function in *Crime and Punishment* is too complicated to explain here in detail, but Dostoevsky gives us a broad hint by having him say that he is a man of conscience. Metaphorically, this part of Raskolnikov sold out his conscience, but his reified conscience pursued him, and eventually Raskolnikov underwent a conversion.

Lebeziatnikov (“fawner”) becomes a seer—actually spots the dishonesty of Egoism—when and because he is in the presence of Divine Wisdom. It is not that Dostoevsky forgot that his character had “vision” problems: the character’s inability to “see” was cured when he encountered Wisdom. And keep in mind that, from Dostoevsky’s point of view, Raskolnikov’s egoism could never be a trivial part of a novel about an epiphany. Seen as a hindrance to an epiphany, Luzhin is indeed a major figure in the novel, and he must be disposed of. So let us reconsider the criticism we quoted: “The larger significance that Dostoevsky seemed at first to reserve for [Luzhin] disappeared as the narrative lines in which he is important faded away in the process of writing.” These “narrative lines” disappear because Raskolnikov’s egoism can’t be allowed to stick around to celebrate the epiphany. That is what the epiphany is: a loss of egoism. So Divine Wisdom, seemingly frail and helpless, has fought it out with Egoism—to all appearances a far stronger force—and won a great victory. All the abstract entities have been made concrete and sent into active battle.

How do we know that Dostoevsky is writing a metaphorical story parallel to the literal story? The allegorical names are of course a strong hint. But Dostoevsky also has one of the villains, Svidrigailov, offer up a theory that explains ghosts and accounts for why characters in *Crime and Punishment* keep making “coincidental” appearances:

Ghosts are, so to speak, bits and pieces of other worlds, their beginnings. The healthy man, naturally, has no call to see them, because the healthy man is the most earthly of men, and therefore he ought to live according to life here, for the sake of completeness and order. Well, but as soon as a man gets sick, as soon as the normal earthly order of his organism is disrupted, the possibility of another world at once begins to make itself known, and the sicker one is, the greater the contact with this other world, so that when a man dies altogether, he goes to the other world directly.<sup>10</sup>

Raskolnikov is the sick subject in the novel, and Dostoevsky splits his consciousness into pieces, represented by the other characters, then lets them fight it out (contrast, vividness) until all the bad ones are killed off, whereupon Raskolnikov gets well. Pressing his method still further, again and again Dostoevsky has Raskolnikov see pieces of his very *thoughts* suddenly reify right before his eyes and play out as they would in real life.



When the young man considers suicide, he immediately witnesses a suicide attempt. This is *not* a coincidence; it is a reification of his thinking process that makes mere “thinking” vivid and dramatic for the reader. Similarly, when Raskolnikov tries drinking as a solution to his problems, it seems to work wonderfully for a moment, and then his attention is drawn to a drunk nearby. Dostoevsky goes to some lengths to point out a mysterious connection between Raskolnikov and the drunk, who, as you may have guessed by now, will have to come to a bad end for Raskolnikov to recover. He too is a piece of Raskolnikov, the part that seeks solace in self-indulgence. That’s why his name (Marmeladov) is of a saccharine nature. It is no coincidence that he appears when Raskolnikov decides to wash away his cares in a flood of beer, or that he is fatally injured when Raskolnikov, standing at a crossroads, moves toward self-understanding.

It is also no coincidence that, as the critic complained, the different characters, rich and poor, live next door to each other: in *Crime and Punishment*, buildings are always metaphors for the mind. It can hardly come as a surprise that different pieces of Raskolnikov’s mind live next door to each other.

So how would the author signal a *change* of mind, if characters were metaphors for the pieces of a mind and their dwelling was a metaphor for the mind itself? Right: by showing renovations, which in *Crime and Punishment* always denote a change of mind. When Razumikhin moves closer to Raskolnikov, this is a sign that the latter is gaining access to his own reason. And the sign that wisdom is being neglected is that “Sonia is not at home.” Conversely, when the principal villain begins to repent, he goes straight to Sonia: “She was at home.”

If you now read *Crime and Punishment* and still can’t see what Dostoevsky is doing, it is probably because you have been infected with literary theoritis. Nowadays, allegories are unpopular and questions of meaning have disappeared from novels.

But we have even more bad news to report. Dostoevsky not only wrote an allegory, and not only was it about an epiphany, but it was clearly his own epiphany that he was writing about. Scarcely anything is more taboo in modern literary studies than the notion that the author of a novel could be writing about himself. But what are we to do? Dostoevsky

deliberately ignored the literary taboos of the next century and left his novel strewn with the evidence.

Where does Raskolnikov live in Petersburg? With a choice of any address in Petersburg, Dostoevsky put him on the very street Dostoevsky lived on before he was exiled to Siberia.

Where does he end up? On the banks of a large river in Siberia, in prison, like Dostoevsky.

What is being done at that prison? Alabaster is being refined.

Why refining? Well, because that is part of Dostoevsky's experience in Siberia and because "refining" is the standard metaphor in Judeo-Christian tradition for the process that leads to an epiphany.

But let's imagine that the reader is still unconvinced that Dostoevsky was writing about his own epiphany. To prove this, we have to look at the main villain, Svidrigailov, who is shown in a multitude of ways to be a piece of Raskolnikov. If this is so, then the name "Svidrigailov" has to be another metaphorical name, like "Razumikhin," "Raskolnikov," and "Sophia/Sonia."

"Svidrigailov" is clearly the Lithuanian name "Svidrigailo" (Dostoevsky's family was originally from Lithuania) plus a suffix declinable in Russian. And Svidrigailo was a historical figure, from the fifteenth century, who imprisoned and then released a saint: St. Theodore (Fyodor), who by the most remarkable "coincidence" of all, has the same first name as Dostoevsky. (Russian names were typically chosen from the saints' calendar.) And we have a further coincidence to report: Svidrigailov, the fictional one, also imprisons and then releases someone, another character who incorporates a major piece of Raskolnikov's mind, his sister Dunia.

So Dostoevsky creates a character who incorporates his own character defects in an extreme form (Svidrigailov), then shows how that character comes very close to winning a battle for his soul, only to lose to Wisdom, very much the way Luzhin/Egoism already had. And to make the point (but very subtly) that it is his own epiphany that is at issue, he gives the character a name associated with the imprisonment of a historical figure with Dostoevsky's own first name. Fyodor, initially imprisoned by his character defects, is released when these are conquered by Divine Wisdom.

But why does Dostoevsky turn an epiphany into a murder mystery?

Obviously because he couldn't sell a story about an epiphany to an editor and the public. Murder sells, epiphanies don't. You can test this statement by watching a few episodes of *Epiphany She Wrote* or *Women's Epiphany Club*.

But why does he make it so obscure?

Because an obvious allegory becomes tiresome very quickly. You can test *this* hypothesis by trying to read *The Pilgrim's Progress*. I actually did this—tried, that is.

And let us get back to seeming coincidences: Who appears at the very moment Raskolnikov has his epiphany?

Who else but Sonia/Sophia. Another coincidence? Of course not: Divine Wisdom appears because Raskolnikov finally wises up to his own deep flaws. So far from being full of "coincidences," *Crime and Punishment* is in fact rigorously organized according to a strict scheme of cause and effect. The Epilogue, which has been criticized for being a casual addendum to the story, in fact is the very culmination of the story, for that is where the last piece of Raskolnikov (Sophia: Divine Wisdom) becomes one with him, and henceforth she lives "just by his life alone!"<sup>11</sup> On the literal level, Sonia is a really nice lady who thinks only of her husband's needs, but on the metaphorical level, the last piece of Raskolnikov's riven mind has finally been fully incorporated. The literal story is a melodrama, the allegorical one a masterpiece. To create it, Dostoevsky invented a stunning array of methods based on the recognition that abstractions always have to be connected to grittily real pieces of the physical world if they are to generate drama, or contrast, while by incorporating the mind-splinters of his single protagonist into the various characters, he maintains coherence.



And here we have to consider the whole question of endings. Many, if not most, beginning writers have the experience of discovering that their story just stops with an annoying brusqueness. This is usually because they mistake the end of the events in the story for the end of the story itself. For the story to end in a satisfying way, our brains demand an extra infusion of coherence.

Coherence can come from many sources, of course, as we saw in earlier chapters. A not uncommon way to insert the extra dollop of coherence is to return to the beginning, like the ancient mythical snake, the ouroboros, which turns itself into a ring by biting its own tail. In both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, the protagonists return at last to Hobbiton in the Shire, where their stories began: “There and Back Again,” as Bilbo’s title says. Mozart does the same trick in *Don Giovanni*, but psychologically. Thus, instead of ending simply with the death of Giovanni (solution of the apparent problem), he ends with a sextet of the surviving characters, in which they all revert to what they had been doing at the start—moping, complaining, flirting, protesting.<sup>D</sup> In short, Don Giovanni’s cataclysmic death has changed nothing, and Mozart is winking at us: the opera is not a tragedy, but a farce, come full circle.

The need for extra coherence is also why Melville couldn’t just stop *Moby-Dick* when he ran out of people and whales. To see that, let us experiment. We shall end *Moby-Dick* by just going into a breezy style and then stopping:

Well, you’re probably wondering how I lived to tell the story, but it turned out another whaler happened along while I was taking my rest on a coffin, and they picked me up. So that’s pretty much the end of the story.

Instead of that, Melville dug around in two of his sources of coherence, the one being an event already known to the reader, the other a metaphorical name from the Old Testament—something, as we have seen, he uses heavily throughout the novel. The name is that of the Rachel, the ship that is searching for the lost son of its captain and finds Ishmael instead. “Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not.” (Jeremiah xxxi, 15) The Pequod encounters the Rachel before it comes to a bad end, and then finally, after the disaster:

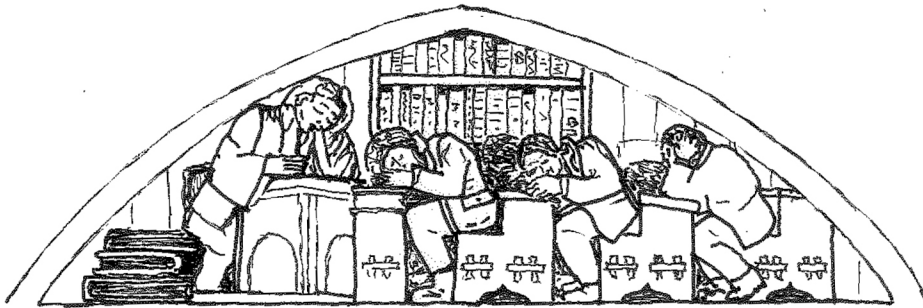
On the second day, a sail drew near, nearer, and picked me up at last. It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan.

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D. And especially Donna Anna, the opening character, still putting off Don Octavio (who still keeps trying to placate her).

And Dostoevsky? On another continent, in another culture, he used the same method: he rummaged around in his sources of coherence and selected a motif that had occurred many times before: A character who represents wisdom appears when the hero finally gets wise to himself. Now all hindrances to her presence have been swept away; once a “temp,” she now takes on a full-time position as Raskolnikov’s guide and inspiration.

And that is why the Epilogue of *Crime and Punishment*, far from being a casual addition to the novel, is actually the perfect coherent ending to it, and a good place for us to stop as well.



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1. Tolkien, 304.
2. Tolkien, 284.
3. Simmons, 524.
4. Rahv, 556-7.
5. Sultan, Stanley, 57-61.
6. Wasiolek, 8.
7. <http://coygonfa.blogspot.com/2009/04/crime-and-punishment-epilogue.html>.  
See also Rahv, 565.
8. Nabokov, 98.
9. Dostoevsky (1993), 129
10. Dostoevsky (1993), 289.
11. Dostoevsky (1993), 550.

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